US blocks cease-fire, gives Israel carte blanche to continue killing in Gaza

Barry Grey
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As the Israeli devastation of Gaza enters its second week and signs point to an imminent ground invasion of the densely populated and impoverished Palestinian territory, the US government is working to block diplomatic initiatives for a cease-fire in order to give Israel a free hand to intensify its assault on the defenseless population.

While Israeli planes, warships and missiles continued to level civilian buildings, mosques and homes, and thousands of Israeli troops with tanks, artillery and armored vehicles awaited the order to enter the Palestinian enclave, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice appeared outside the White House Friday morning following a briefing on the Gaza crisis with President George W. Bush. In a terse statement, Rice once again placed the blame for the Israeli aggression on Hamas and underscored Washington's support for Israel's rejection of cease-fire proposals from France, the European Union and a number of Arab governments.

"We are working toward a cease-fire that would not allow a reestablishment of the status quo ante where Hamas can continue to launch rockets out of Gaza.... [W]e need a cease-fire that is durable and sustainable," Rice said. By placing such conditions on any cessation of Israeli attacks, Rice effectively ruled out an early truce in a one-sided war that has already claimed the lives of at least 430 Palestinians and injured another 2,200.

The mantra of a "durable and sustainable" cease-fire echoes almost verbatim the line adopted by Rice and the Bush administration to oppose a cease-fire during the 33-day Israeli assault on Lebanon in the summer of 2006. In the midst of that conflict, while Israeli planes and troops were devastating large parts of southern Lebanon and Beirut in an unsuccessful attempt to wipe out the nationalist-Islamist Hezbollah movement, Rice publicly urged Israel to reject demands for a cease-fire and called the Israeli assault "the birth pangs of a new Middle East."

Her appearance Friday once again highlighted US complicity in an Israeli war crime against the Arab masses. In rejecting the "status quo ante," Rice made no mention of the 18-month Israeli blockade of Gaza, which has brought the region's economy to a halt and produced a humanitarian disaster.

Neither Rice nor the Israelis have spelled out precisely what they mean by an end to the status quo ante, but the logic of their position is either "regime change"—the toppling of the popularly elected Hamas government in Gaza—or the massacre of a large portion of the civilian population.

As she left for talks in Paris earlier this week, Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni hinted as much, telling Israel Radio that her government would not agree to a cease-fire at this point and would continue with its military operation. "This is not a short battle and it is not a single battle, and we have long-range goals," Livni said.

Rice's statement amounts to a green light for an intensification of the slaughter in Gaza in the form of an Israeli ground assault. On Friday, Israel allowed several hundred people in Gaza holding foreign passports to leave the besieged territory. The Israeli government also evacuated a hospital near the border with Gaza, suggesting that the regime anticipates an increase in casualties. These are ominous signs of a move by Israeli troops and tanks into the territory and a dramatic escalation of the killing.

In another indication of military escalation, Israel announced that it was sealing off the West Bank for two days. That move coincided with protests by thousands of Palestinians across the West Bank in solidarity with Gaza.

Friday's demonstrations were in response to a call from Hamas for a "day of wrath" following the previous day's Israeli bombing of the home of Hamas leader Nizar Rayan. An Israeli war plane dropped a one-ton bomb on the apartment complex where Rayan lived in the Jabalya refugee camp north of Gaza City, killing Rayan and at least 20 other people, including his four wives and 11 of his children, ages 2 to 19. The bomb also badly damaged neighboring buildings.

The murder of Rayan signaled a revival of the Israeli policy of "targeted assassinations," aimed at exterminating the top Hamas leadership. On Friday, Israeli bombs and

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missiles leveled the homes of other Hamas officials. The *Washington Post* reported Friday that Israeli military spokeswoman Maj. Avital Leibovich indicated that "other Hamas leaders were also marked men. ‘We have defined legitimate targets as any Hamas-affiliated target,' she said."

The West Bank protesters directed their anger not only against Israel and the US, but also against Arab governments and the leadership of the Palestinian Authority, who have either openly or tacitly joined with the US and Israel in blaming the war on Hamas and refused to take any serious action to oppose the assault on Gaza.

Thousands gathered in Ramallah, while in Israeli-occupied East Jerusalem, youth threw stones at security forces, who fired rubber bullets and tear gas.

Egypt's Islamist opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood, said 300 anti-Israel protesters had been surrounded by security forces outside a mosque in central Cairo, and that many others had been detained. There were also reports that riot police used batons to beat protesters in Cairo and the town of El-Arish in Northern Sinai.

Demonstrators also took to the streets of the Indonesian capital Jakarta and the Australian city of Sydney, as well as cities in Kenya and Iran.

Riot police fired tear gas at hundreds of Jordanian protesters trying to march on the Israeli embassy in the capital, Amman.

In Gaza itself, thousands of Palestinians marched in a funeral procession for Rayan, while Israeli jets buzzed menacingly overhead.

The death toll in Gaza continued to rise, as Israeli jets and ships pounded tunnels, refugee camps and houses. There were at least 30 new air strikes on Friday, including one that leveled a mosque in the Jabaliya camp. Israeli claims that it is seeking to avoid civilian casualties are completely cynical.

As the Associated Press reported: "With some 1.4 million Gazans crammed into a sliver of land 25 miles long and just 3 to 7 miles wide, military targets and civilians tend to exist side by side." The AP continued: [T]he broad range of Israel's targets—police compounds, fire stations, homes of militants, Hamas-run mosques and university buildings—means most shelling is occurring in residential areas."

As the bombing continues, the proportion of civilian casualties as compared to police and Hamas security personnel is rising. According to one report on Friday, of 31 additional deaths, 25 were civilians. In one air raid in southern Gaza, three brothers aged 7 to 10 were killed.

The efforts of Israel to terrorize the civilian population were indicated in a January 1 report by the *New York Times*, which wrote: "Tens of thousands of Gazans have received recorded phone calls from the Israeli Army warning them that their houses have been marked as targets because they harbored either militants or weapons facilities like rocket workshops. Noncombatants were urged to clear out. Hundreds of thousands of leaflets gave the same message."

Precisely where the residents of marked houses are to go in the besieged and surrounded territory, the Israeli military does not say.

The air war is already the bloodiest conflict in Gaza since Israel seized the territory in 1967. But the killing and destruction in the first week of the attack could be a mere prelude to something far more horrific. There are powerful elements in the Israeli military and political establishment that are itching for something akin to genocide.

This was indicated, according to Friday's *Financial Times*, by an analysis for Israel's Institute for National Strategic Studies presented on Wednesday. The author, Shlomo Brom, a former head of the armed forces' strategic planning unit, warned: "As is common in these situations, Israel's primary problem is finding an exit strategy.... The main risk is that, partly due to the success of the initial military moves, Israel will get caught up in the view that it is necessary to eliminate physically the rocket fire capabilities of Hamas."

In fact, the largely ineffectual homemade rockets fired from Gaza, provoked by Israeli's brutal blockage of the territory, serve as a pretext for a war driven by the political and geo-strategic interests of both Israel and the US. For its part, the Israeli ruling elite is determined to overcome the damage to its image of military invincibility resulting from its failure to destroy Hezbollah in the 2006 Lebanon War, and to create the conditions for permanently crushing Palestinian resistance to decades of colonial-style occupation. Its military violence is at the same time driven by growing social tensions within Israel itself.

For the US, aggression by its main political and military ally in the Middle East is seen as a means of advancing the hegemonic aims of American imperialism against such obstacles as Iran and Syria in the oil-rich and strategically crucial region.

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