

Israel spreads death and destruction as it advances into Gaza

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The toll of Palestinians killed and wounded continues to rise rapidly as Israel intensifies its combined air and ground assault on the largely defenseless and starved Gaza Strip.

While Israel conducts a campaign of killing and collective punishment against the civilian population, the United States continues to block all diplomatic initiatives aimed at imposing a cease-fire. Since Israeli troops, tanks and artillery crossed the border into Gaza Saturday night, at least 64 more Palestinian civilians have been killed, bringing the total in the 11-day war to more than 530. The number of wounded is in the thousands.

According to press reports and statements from the Israeli military, Israeli forces have taken control of several towns north of Gaza City, cut the narrow enclave in half and surrounded Gaza City. There are also reports that Israeli forces are moving toward Gaza's southern border with Egypt in an attempt to cut off the last remaining connection, already restricted by the Egyptian regime, between the besieged population of 1.5 million Gazans and the outside world.

Israeli forces, enjoying total control of the air and advanced weaponry, are reportedly facing resistance from Hamas fighters, who are equipped only with primitive mortars and small arms. Israel has confirmed the death of one soldier and the wounding of thirty others. Despite the Israeli ground assault and ongoing bombardment of homes, government buildings, mosques, fire stations, universities and ambulances, some 40 rockets were fired from Gaza into southern Israel on Sunday.

The ground offensive has cut power supplies and exacerbated an already catastrophic humanitarian crisis.

Gaza health officials said the dead since the start of the ground assault included a 12-year-old girl, five members of a single family, eight civilians killed by a tank shell in the northern Gaza town of Beit Lahiya and an ambulance driver.

At least five civilians were killed and many wounded on Sunday morning when Israeli shells fell on the market of Gaza City while people were stocking up on supplies.

Two young cousins and a five-year-old boy from another family were killed by shrapnel as they played on the flat roofs of their apartment buildings.

Israeli troops also killed a Palestinian demonstrator in the West Bank town of Qalqilya, near the separation barrier erected by Israel to wall in the inhabitants of the occupied West Bank.

Israel has called up tens of thousands of reservists for active duty and indicated it intends to remain in the areas it has seized for some time. It is not yet clear whether it intends to enter major urban centers such as Gaza City or the teeming refugee camps.

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said Saturday night that the fighting "won't be easy and it won't be short." A senior Israeli military official said Sunday the offensive was "not something measured in days or hours." "We are not desperate for an exit," the Israeli diplomat said.

The *New York Times* reported Monday that a senior Israeli military official said in a telephone briefing for foreign correspondents, "We don't plan to retake the Gaza Strip, but there are several places we control now and will control later. If it will be needed, we are prepared to stay there."

An Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman said, "Regime change is not a stated goal." But "no one will shed too many tears if this eventually happens."

Reports from Gaza are sparse, since Israel has refused to allow correspondents into the territory. In so doing, the government is defying an order from the Israeli Supreme Court that it allow a small group of reporters into the region. The Western media, which is generally echoing the war propaganda of Israel, has said little about this enforced news blackout, which belies Israel's claims to be scrupulously avoiding civilian casualties and its repeated denials that a humanitarian crisis exists in Gaza. It is self-evident that Israel is banning reporters because it does not want the world to see up close the crimes it is committing against the Palestinian people.

However, no amount of propaganda and lies can conceal the fact that Israel, with the full support of the United States, is committing a war crime. Over the weekend, the European Commission condemned Israel, saying it was "blocking access to people who are suffering and dying," which it described as a breach of humanitarian law.

The scattered reports that are emerging from Gaza make clear that in the towns occupied by Israeli troops, such as Beit Lahiya and Beit Hanoun in the northern Gaza Strip, Israeli forces are going house to house, arresting the men and subjecting them to "interrogation." Many houses are being leveled in a campaign of collective punishment and mass terror.

According to some reports from the region close to the Israeli border, entire areas have been turned into virtual free-fire zones. *USA Today* on Monday cited Ashraf al-Masri, a 35-year-old taxi driver in Gaza, as saying Israeli troops are "shooting at anything that moves."

"There's no electricity. There's no water. There's fear," said al-Masri, who lives in Beit Hanoun. "What have we done to deserve this?"

The *New York Times* on Monday quoted a woman who came to the Shifa Hospital in Gaza City with a daughter, 15, who was wounded by shrapnel, "who said soldiers had taken over their house in Beit Lahiya and had detained the men, who she said were farmers. The family said the daughter was wounded when Israeli forces fired on the upper

floors of the house."

The *Times* continued: "Another Gazan who lives near the border with Israel said the Israelis had destroyed many houses nearby that were identified as belonging to Hamas operatives."

From the press dispatches that have emerged, it is clear that a humanitarian crisis of immense proportions is unfolding in Gaza. The *Financial Times* on Monday cited Chris Gunness, spokesman for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, who said "patients with injuries that were not life-threatening, even those who lost limbs during the bombardment, were being sent home for lack of beds and medical staff.

"He added that the ground attack has resulted in the destruction of more homes and prompted hundreds of Gazans to seek shelter with his agency."

Gaza City, with 400,000 people, has been left without electricity or water.

Tareq Abed Shafi, a professor of international law in Gaza City and a human rights activist, told the *Financial Times*, "I am 48 years old and I have never experienced such a terrifying situation in Gaza. They were striking everywhere."

The *New York Times*, hardly known for its sympathy for the Palestinians, published a front-page account Monday providing a sense of the suffering of ordinary Gazans. Entitled "Hospital Fills Up, Mainly With Civilians," the article described conditions in Gaza City's Shifa Hospital:

"The casualties at Shifa on Sunday—18 dead, hospital officials said, among a reported 30 around Gaza—were women, children and men who had been with children. One surgeon said he had performed five amputations.

"'I don't know what kind of weapons Israel is using,' said a nurse, Ziad Abd al Jawwad, 41, who had been working 24 hours without a break. 'There is so much amputation.'"

The article continued: "Dr. Mads Gilbert, a Norwegian who was allowed into Gaza last week to give emergency medical aid, and who has worked in many conflict zones, said the situation was the worst he had seen.

"The hospital lacked everything, he said: monitors, anesthesia, surgical equipment, heaters and spare parts..."

The article spoke of hospital workers constantly mopping up blood and noted, "A terrible stench is in the air."

It went on to quote Oved Yehezkel, the Israeli cabinet secretary, who said Sunday that "there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza."

Separate diplomatic efforts have been launched by the European Union, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Arab foreign ministers and Russia's special envoy to the Middle East to press for a cease-fire. The EU, Sarkozy and the Russian envoy are in the Middle East, meeting with the Israelis, the Egyptians, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and, in the case of Sarkozy, the Syrians. The Arab foreign ministers are in New York seeking to press the United Nations Security Council to take action.

However, they face the determined opposition of Israel and its main sponsor and military supplier, the United States. In any event, all of these groups are fundamentally hostile to Hamas and are seeking to fashion some agreement, acceptable to Israel, that would weaken Hamas's control over Gaza and block it from obtaining arms.

Some, such as Sarkozy, the EU and such Arab regimes as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, have echoed the propaganda of the US and Israel in placing the blame for the Israeli offensive on Hamas and legitimizing the Israeli assault as a matter of self-defense against Hamas rockets. In

one way or another, they want to replace Hamas with an administration controlled by the US-Israeli puppet Abbas.

The specious claim that the Israeli offensive is a response to an increase in largely ineffectual, homemade rockets fired from Gaza into southern Israel was belied by an article in the fiercely pro-war *Jerusalem Post*, which noted on Monday:

"While a week passed between the beginning of the aerial strikes and the ground offensive, they are part of the same operation, the plan for which was drafted three years ago and had been practiced a number of times."

In other words, the Israeli plan to invade Gaza was drawn up at the time Hamas defeated the US- and Israeli-backed Fatah movement of Abbas and won Palestinian elections in January of 2006. Since then, Israel has been staging attacks and provocations designed to provide a pretext for carrying out its planned aggression.

President-elect Barack Obama continues to maintain his official silence on the Gaza crisis, thereby giving tacit support to Israel's actions. Other leading Democrats are not so discreet. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said on a Sunday talk show, "I think this terrorist organization, Hamas, has got to be put away."

Sections of the US media are all but openly calling for a settlement with Hamas and the Palestinians of genocidal proportions. The *Wall Street Journal* on Monday editorialized that "Hamas has to be destroyed as a military force." It praised the Israeli offensive, comparing it to the US "surge" in Iraq.

The same issue of the newspaper carried an op-ed piece by the prominent neo-conservative Max Boot, who said more than he intended when he wrote of the Israeli offensive: "The only comparable example of restraint is the conduct of the US armed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan."

Indeed, Israel is taking a page from US imperialism's book in its murderous attack on Gaza. Washington has killed over a million Iraqis in its neo-colonial war and occupation of that tortured country, destroying entire cities such as Fallujah. It has killed thousands in Afghanistan and is preparing to increase the bloodletting with a military "surge" there. Such is the model for Israel in Gaza.



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