

Israeli forces have killed more than 1,000 Palestinians in Gaza

David Walsh
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The death toll in the Israeli military assault on the Gaza Strip reached more than 1,000 Wednesday, according to the Ministry of Health in Gaza.

Almost one third of the Palestinian fatalities in Gaza are reported to be children, and some 5,000 people have been wounded in Israeli attacks. Gazan medical officials report that some 1,600 children and 678 women are among the injured.

The Gaza-based Palestinian Centre for Human Rights said more than 670 civilians were among the dead.

Nine Israeli human rights groups, in a statement issued Wednesday, charged the Israeli government and military with violations of the "laws of warfare" and raised "the suspicion...of the commission of war crimes."

Fewer Palestinians were killed yesterday, but fierce fighting reportedly continued between Israeli troops and Hamas fighters near Gaza City. Israeli troops remain poised to enter into more heavily populated areas, with incalculable consequences.

The Israeli air force carried out 60 airstrikes overnight, dropping more bombs on the border area near Egypt.

"They used bombs that went deep into the tunnels and shook the whole Rafah refugee camp. The land trembled beneath our feet," Bassam Abdallah, a local Palestinian cameraman, told a reporter. "We used to be afraid—but now we're getting used to it."

The Israelis also bombed the Sheik Radwan cemetery in Gaza City, alleging it was a rocket-launching site. A CBS/Associated Press report described the grisly scene: "One airstrike hit an overcrowded cemetery, spreading body parts and rotting flesh over a wide area."

Ironically, AP had run a story Tuesday about the graveyard, noting, "More than two weeks into the Israeli offensive...Gazans are struggling to find places to bury their dead. Cemeteries throughout Gaza City that were closed for new burials have now reopened.

"'Gaza is all a graveyard,' gravedigger Salman Omar said Tuesday as he shoveled earth in Gaza City's crammed Sheik Radwan cemetery."

Among the dead were "the Samouni cousins, five-month-old Mohammed, one-year-old Mutasim and two-year-old Ahmed, whose family hurriedly dug up the grave of an aunt to lay them

to rest last week....

"The three boys were killed Jan. 5 in what the family and the United Nations said was an Israeli shelling attack on a house in eastern Gaza where they had evacuated on soldiers' orders to avoid nearby fighting."

Al Jazeera reporter Ayman Mohyeldin commented Wednesday that the situation for Gaza citizens remains one of "complete fear and terror." Mohyeldin explained, "For those who venture out [for food]...they know that any time they leave their house it could be the last time.

"More than 80,000 Palestinians have now fled their homes because of the fighting around them...there is a sense of overcrowding.... UN schools have taken in 35,000 refugees.... There is real desperation and fear among the people."

The chief of the Gaza Strip water authority told the media Wednesday that 800,000 Palestinians, out of a population of 1.5 million, are without water due to the Israeli ground offensive.

Monzer Shublaq told reporters, "There are two reasons that led to the water crisis. One is that the Israeli army tanks destroyed the major water pipes that supply large areas in the Gaza Strip." Shublaq said the other reason was that Israel has been closing down all its border crossings with Gaza and has not allowed fuel into the enclave for several weeks, leaving the enclave no fuel with which to operate most of its water pumps.

"Forty percent of the Gaza Strip water sources are not working," the water authority chief asserted. "We were producing on a daily basis 220,000 cubic meters of water; now we only pump 100,000 cubic meters every day."

Palestinian surveyors estimate that Israeli bombs and artillery have already destroyed at least \$1.4 billion worth of buildings, roads, pipes, power lines and other infrastructure in Gaza. A Hamas official this week told the group's television station that about 1,000 residential buildings had been destroyed, and 25,000 damaged.

"The war on the Gaza Strip has left a very deteriorated humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip," observed a spokesman for the United Nations Relief and Work Agency, Adnan Abu Hasna, who added, "If the war keeps on, more humanitarian crises are expected to emerge."

In a statement issued January 14, UNICEF Executive Director Ann M. Veneman commented on the deaths of the 300

Palestinian children and the wounding of another 1,500, declaring: "Each day more children are being hurt, their small bodies wounded, their young lives shattered....

"Children form the majority of the population of Gaza. They are bearing the brunt of a conflict which is not theirs. As fighting reaches the heart of heavily populated urban areas, the impact of lethal weapons will carry an even heavier toll on children. Absolute priority must be given to their protection....

"Beyond the immediate needs of the children who have lost their homes, have no access to water, electricity and medicine, beyond the horrific physical scars and injuries however, are the deeper psychological wounds of these children."

In their open letter to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on Wednesday, the Israeli human rights groups stated that "a heavy suspicion has arisen of grave violations of international humanitarian law by military forces. After the end of the hostilities, the time will come for the investigation of this matter, and accountability will be demanded of those responsible for the violations."

The groups, including B'Tselem, the Israeli section of Amnesty International and Physicians for Human Rights, continue: "The level of harm to the civilian population is unprecedented. According to the testimony of residents of the Gaza Strip and media reports, military forces are making wanton use of lethal force which has to date caused the deaths of hundreds of uninvolved civilians and destroyed infrastructure and property on an enormous scale. In addition, Israel is also hitting civilian objects, having defined them as 'legitimate military targets' solely by virtue of their being 'symbols of government.'

The human rights organizations point out that Gaza's residents "have nowhere to flee, neither inside the Gaza Strip nor by leaving it.... They are forced to live in fear and terror. The army's demand that they evacuate their homes so as to avoid injury has no basis. Some people who did escape are living as refugees, stripped of all resources."

The statement points out that the "health system has collapsed.... This state of affairs is causing the death of injured persons who could have been saved."

It goes on: "Areas that were subject to intensive attacks are completely isolated. It is impossible to know the condition of the people who are there, whether they are injured and need treatment and whether they have food, water and medicine. The army is preventing local and international rescue teams from accessing those places and is also refraining from helping them itself, even though it is required to do so by law."

The groups assert that "This kind of fighting constitutes a blatant violation of the laws of warfare and raises the suspicion, which we ask be investigated, of the commission of war crimes. The responsibility of the State of Israel in this matter is clear and beyond doubt."

On January 13, B'Tselem reported the allegation by a "Palestinian who is besieged with his family in the Khuza'a

area, in the south-eastern Gaza Strip...that soldiers had shot a woman waving a white flag and several civilians who were fleeing a bombed house on army orders."

According to the report, "Rawhiya a-Najar, 50, stepped out of her house waving a white flag, so that the rest of the family could leave the house and walk behind her. The witness reported that she was shot and fell. Neither family members nor rescue workers have managed to reach her to ascertain her condition, but she is still lying motionless where she fell."

And further: "This afternoon, the army announced on loudspeakers that residents are to leave their homes and walk to a school in the village center. Some 30 people left their houses carrying white flags. The witness reported that after they had walked approximately 20 meters, fire was opened at the group, killing three of his relatives: Muhammad Salman a-Najar, 54, Ahmad Jum'a a-Najar, 25, and Khalil Hamdan a-Najar, 80. Many others were injured."

The murderous Israeli onslaught continues with the open support of the White House, the tacit endorsement of the European governments and the complicity of the different Arab regimes.

Various diplomatic maneuvers are under way. Egyptian officials claimed Wednesday that Hamas representatives had responded "positively" to a cease-fire proposal after two days of negotiations. The Hamas delegation reportedly held the talks in Cairo with representatives of the Egyptian General Intelligence Service.

According to press reports, the Egyptian deal calls for a temporary cease-fire, followed by a long-term truce and the opening of Gaza's border crossings in the presence of officials from the Palestinian Authority.

A Hamas official said that the Egyptians would present its views to the Israelis. The organization is apparently insisting on a withdrawal of all Israeli forces from Gaza and the permanent opening of all Gaza crossings.



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