

Israeli military lays siege to Gaza City

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Israeli military forces carried out a ferocious assault on densely populated neighborhoods in Gaza City Thursday, forcing thousands of civilians to flee their homes as ground forces, backed by a steady barrage of heavy artillery, helicopter gunships and tanks made their deepest foray into the city of 500,000 people.

Three hospitals and the United Nations Gaza headquarters were bombed and set ablaze on the 20th day of the assault, which has left at least 1,095 Palestinians dead and more than 5,100 wounded. Nearly half of those killed have been civilians, including 330 children, according to the health ministry in Gaza.

Seven hundred Palestinians were seeking shelter and food at the UN complex when at least three shells filled with white phosphorus, a napalm-like incendiary chemical, struck two buildings, wounding two staff members. Adnan Abu Hasna, a spokesman for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), told Al Jazeera that fires continued to rage for hours after the attack, destroying "tens of millions of dollars worth of aid," including food, medical supplies and other emergency material at the warehouse.

Like the previous shelling of the UN school compound in Jabaliya in northern Gaza, which killed at least 40 men, women and children, Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), which were given the GPS coordinates of all UN facilities in Gaza, deliberately targeted the headquarters as part of its campaign to cut off all relief to the besieged population. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon was in Tel Aviv discussing a possible cease-fire at the time of the attack.

Christopher Gunness, another spokesman for the UN relief agency, rejected Israeli claims that Hamas fighters had fired from inside or near the compound. "With every false allegation, the credibility of those accusing us is incrementally diminished," Gunness told the *New York Times*.

The aid group CARE also reported that its warehouses and distribution centers in Gaza were under bombardment and that it had been forced to cancel the distribution of food and medical supplies it had intended to deliver to hospitals and clinics. Martha Myers, CARE's director for the West Bank

and Gaza, told the *Times* "our staff had to drop and run" after bombs rained down near their warehouse Wednesday.

Al Jazeera reported that 500 people were in the Al-Quds hospital in the city's southwestern Tal Al-Hawa district when it was bombed by US-made jets and set on fire Thursday morning. The last hit was on the Red Crescent's operations building, destroying the pharmacy. "There's a hole in the roof and a fire is still burning," Sharon Locke, a hospital volunteer, told Al Jazeera. Two other hospitals, east of Gaza City, were also hit by shells, as was the Al Shuroq Tower, a high-rise building housing Reuters and several other media organizations, wounding a journalist for the Abu Dhabi television channel.

An Israel Air Force strike in Gaza City killed three of Hamas's most senior officials Thursday, Palestinian sources reported. Interior Minister Said Siam, the head of its security apparatus, Salah Abu Shreh, and the head of its military wing, Mahmoud Watfah, were killed in the targeted assassination organized by the security agency Shin Bet. The air strike, which hit Siam's brother's home, also killed his brother and son and wounded six other Hamas members.

Siam was the founder of the Hamas-led police force, which played a key role in defeating the US-backed coup by Mahmoud Abbas, the Fatah president of the Palestinian Authority, who sought to depose Hamas after it won parliamentary elections in Gaza in 2006.

In an interview in November 1995, Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* quoted Siam saying, "I do not hate [Israelis] for being Jewish or Israeli but because of what they have done to us. Because of the acts of occupation." In response to a question about whether he saw a chance for change in relations between Palestinians and Israelis, he said, "It is difficult to forget what was done to us. If the reason for the hate will not exist, everything is possible."

The air strike on Siam, the paper wrote Thursday, "was apparently an attempt by Israel to deliver an image of victory in the offensive against Hamas. The Israel Defense Forces understands that Hamas agreement in principle to the Egyptian proposal for a cease-fire in Gaza signals that the campaign is nearing its end."

Hamas representatives announced an agreement in

principle on Wednesday to an Egyptian proposal for a 10-day truce. Amos Gilad, a senior Israeli envoy, traveled to Cairo Thursday to review the cease-fire proposal before returning to brief Israeli leaders.

The Egyptians joined the Israelis in imposing a crushing blockade on Gaza after Hamas took control of the coastal strip and ousted Abbas's forces in June 2007. The cease-fire reportedly includes demands for a return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza, in the form of its renewed presence at the Rafah crossing with Israel. The most Cairo is offering, Haaretz reported, "is a timetable for the opening of the crossing points, and even that depends on negotiations due to begin after the cease-fire is reached, and it's tough to know how or when they will end."

The Israeli Defense Ministry and top generals—concerned that sustained urban warfare could lead to a politically destabilizing spike in military casualties—have reportedly expressed reservations about expanding the ground incursion in Gaza and support bringing the war to a quick end.

The thrust into Gaza City is aimed at carrying out as much carnage and damage to the infrastructure of the area as possible before a cease-fire takes hold, in all likelihood before or shortly after the inauguration of the new administration in Washington.

Meanwhile, reports of the impact on the civilian population continue to emerge, despite the efforts of the IDF to silence all but embedded media. Mays al-Khatib, a Gaza resident, was speaking to Al Jazeera on the telephone when her building came under attack. "The shelling is continuous since last night, we are here in this place, we are around 500 families here under bombardment," she said, when the telephone went dead. Al Jazeera sources said she survived, though her building collapsed.

The Arab news agency continued, "Much of the fighting was centered in the Tel al-Hawa neighborhood, where some residents fled on foot while others remained in the precarious shelter of their homes as a nighttime attack stretched into the morning.... Tanks and bulldozers rolled into a neighborhood park, apparently seizing it as a kind of command center, witnesses said.

"Residents were seen fleeing their homes in pajamas, some wheeling elderly parents in wheelchairs. Others were stopping journalists' armored cars or ambulances pleading for someone to take them to safety."

The Israeli human rights group B'Tselem received the following statement from the parent of three children in Gaza City. "I swear that tonight I prayed for the Israelis that someone will save them from their leadership. No one is safe. They're not doing a thing to Hamas. Hamas is only getting stronger. After this thing, Hamas will have 50,000 suicide bombers.

"I see children running, fleeing in the streets, these children are one, two, four years old. They are running in the streets. What have they done?

"It was a truly terrible night. Truly. No more than 200 meters from my house. They're failing. Israel is failing. Israel has cursed leadership.... What are they doing? What are they doing? They are not protecting the Israeli nation, they are only harming it. A child whose entire family has been killed will go to commit suicide in a few years. Why not? He has nothing to care about in life. He has nothing to live for."

The bloodletting has provoked disgust and anger in Israel as well. In a rare critical article in *Haaretz* Thursday, correspondent Gideon Levy wrote, "God does not show mercy on the children at Gaza's nursery schools, and neither does the Israel Defense Forces. That's how it goes when war is waged in such a densely populated area with a population so blessed with children. About half of Gaza's residents are under 15."

Noting that even before the war, the IDF had already killed 952 Palestinian children and adolescents since May 2000, Levy wrote, "One can say Hamas hides among the civilian population, as if the Defense Ministry in Tel Aviv is not located in the heart of a civilian population, as if there are places in Gaza that are not in the heart of a civilian population. One can also claim that Hamas uses children as human shields, as if in the past our own organizations fighting to establish a country did not recruit children.

"A significant majority of the children killed in Gaza did not die because they were used as human shields or because they worked for Hamas. They were killed because the IDF bombed, shelled or fired at them, their families or their apartment buildings. That is why the blood of Gaza's children is on our hands, not on Hamas's hands, and we will never be able to escape that responsibility."



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