

Israel prepares to escalate its war on Gaza

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As the Palestinian death toll climbed to 869 on Sunday, the Israeli military was poised to launch a major escalation of its one-sided war against Gaza. The third phase—following the aerial bombardment and the initial ground invasion—involves an all-out assault on the densely populated Gaza City, home to more than 400,000 people.

Early yesterday morning, the Israeli army advanced into Gaza City from three sides. Fierce fighting erupted in the southwestern district of Sheik al-Ajlin as Israeli troops, backed by tanks and helicopter gunships, battled Hamas militiamen armed with rifles and mortars. Israeli forces withdrew after several hours of what appeared to be a probing operation in preparation for a full-scale attack on the city.

The fighting sent a new flood of people fleeing their homes in search of refuge. The Israeli military dropped leaflets on Saturday over Gaza City and Rafah warning that its forces would escalate operations in the Gaza Strip and to stay away from Hamas. But in Gaza, there is no safe place to go. Residential blocks, shelters and mosques have all been targeted. On January 6, Israeli shells killed at least 40 people, including women and children, sheltering in a UN-run refuge at the al-Fakhora school.

Further Israeli atrocities took place during the weekend. On Saturday, at least seven members of the Abed Rabbo clan were killed when their grocery store in a village just east of the Jabaliya refugee camp was shelled. Ambulance driver Zaid Barquouni told the *Los Angeles Times* that neighbours told him that the shelling had come from an Israeli tank several blocks away.

According to the Associated Press, four members of one family died when a tank shell hit their home near Gaza City. By midday yesterday, at least 20 people had been killed. As the death toll climbed over 860, health authorities in Gaza reported that the victims included 270

children, 93 women and 12 paramedics. The World Health Organisation put the casualties among medical staff even higher—at 21 killed, 30 injured—and the number of ambulances hit by Israeli fire at 11.

Fresh allegations surfaced over the weekend of the Israeli military's use of white phosphorus in breach of international humanitarian law. Palestinian medics told the BBC that phosphorus shells had been fired at Khouza, killing a woman and injuring at least 60 people. "These people were burned over their bodies in a way that can only be caused by white phosphorus," Dr Yousef Abu Rish said.

The US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) issued a statement on Saturday condemning the Israeli military's use of white phosphorus as illegal. "White phosphorus can burn down houses and cause horrific burns when it touches the skin," senior HRW analyst Marc Garlasco said. "Israel should not use it in Gaza's densely populated areas."

While Israeli authorities deny breaking international law, the use of white phosphorus is only permitted under international law as a smokescreen, not as a weapon of war or in civilian areas. In the crowded conditions of Gaza, death and injuries are all but inevitable. As the HRW statement pointed out, the danger has been greatly amplified by the technique of air-bursting shells that send out scores of phosphorus wafers over wide areas.

The humanitarian crisis in the besieged Gaza Strip is worsening. The UN estimates that two thirds of the 1.5 million people are without electricity and half have no running water. The British-based *Independent* pointed out that a three-hour pause in the fighting on Saturday was insufficient to allow aid groups to distribute food, and medics to reach casualties. Salam Kanaan of Save the Children said that in previous lulls the agency had reached just 9,500 people out of the 150,000 people it served.

Conditions in hospitals are appalling. At Shifa hospital, Gaza's largest, about 70 patients in the intensive care unit only survive because of four electricity generators. The hospital itself has been without power for the past seven days because Gaza's only power plant has stopped functioning due to the lack of fuel. "How terrible it would be if our patients survive the attacks and then die because of the lack of electricity," the hospital's director, Dr Hassan Khalaf, told the *Independent*.

Israel bluntly rejected last Friday's UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire, declaring it to be "unworkable" because it failed to meet Israeli demands to seal the border between Egypt and Gaza and prevent the firing of rockets into Israeli territory.

Prior to a cabinet meeting yesterday, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared that Israel was nearing its goals. What was under discussion, however, was not an end to the war, but its further escalation. The only hesitation in launching "phase three" of the operation—an assault on Gaza City—is the potential for heavy Israeli military casualties in street fighting, which could provoke opposition in Israel. The Israeli death toll since December 27 is just 13—nine soldiers and four civilians.

Any Israeli invasion of Gaza City would require the deployment of tens of thousands of reservists who were called up for active service in the first days of the war. In another indication that troops will be sent into Gaza City, the *Haaretz* newspaper reported yesterday that Israeli reservists began entering Gaza for the first time.

Israel's escalation is being encouraged by the support of the US as well as the complicity of the European powers and the venal Middle Eastern regimes. In a vote last Friday, the US House of Representatives passed a motion by 390 to 5 expressing "vigorous support and unwavering commitment" for Israel and repeating the lie that Israel was waging a war of "self-defence". A similar motion previously passed the Senate unanimously.

Democrat House Speaker Nancy Pelosi called on countries around the world to "lay blame both for breaking the 'calm' and for subsequent civilian casualties in Gaza precisely where blame belongs, that is, on Hamas". Israel's criminal war against the largely defenceless population of Gaza was, however, planned

well in advance. Hamas's firing of rockets was the pretext for an offensive aimed at imposing Israeli control in Gaza and bolstering its strategic position throughout the Middle East.

The European powers and Middle Eastern regimes have supported talks being held in Egypt on a French-Egyptian plan for a ceasefire. Like the US, the proposal implicitly blames Hamas for the war and ensures that all of Israel's demands are met, for an end to rocket attacks and to cross-border smuggling via Egypt. Israel has called for the presence of international monitors along the border, which Egypt to date has refused.

If talks fail, Israeli officials told the *New York Times* that it was likely that the "third phase" of the war would begin. As well as occupying Gaza City, Israeli troops would seize a strip of land at least 500 metres wide inside Egypt—an act of war that threatens a wider conflict. Israeli war planes have been intensively bombing the border in a bid to destroy cross-border tunnels and, in doing so, frequently infringing Egyptian air space. Yesterday, Israeli air strikes near the Rafah border crossing wounded three Egyptian policemen, two seriously, as well as two children.

Sections of the political and military establishment are pressing for an even more aggressive approach to stamp Israeli control over Gaza. Retired general Avigdor BenGal told the *Times*: "We need to conquer the Gaza Strip and put the Hamas military and political leaders on a French ship to leave Gaza for good, just as we did with [former Palestinian leader Yasser] Arafat in Beirut in 1982. We've already conquered a bigger Arab city than Gaza [namely, Beirut], our army is trained and fit for the mission. The politicians should give the order."

Ominously, unnamed Israeli officials have hinted to the media that the current military offensive potentially has a planned "phase four"—the full reoccupation of Gaza and the toppling of the Hamas regime.



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