

Israeli forces slaughter hundreds in weekend blitz in Gaza

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The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) wreaked devastation across the Gaza Strip over the weekend as it escalated the invasion of the Palestinian territory that began last Thursday night. While northern areas continued to be bombarded from the sea, air and land, a murderous assault began yesterday in Shuja'iya, a residential area east of the centre of Gaza City and less than four kilometres from the border with Israel.

The IDF blog labels Shuja'iya a "Terror Fortress" of the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas, which governs Gaza. In the early hours of Sunday, Shuja'iya was barraged by tank and artillery fire before troops of the Golani Brigade—an Israeli elite regular unit—stormed into the suburb to kill a Hamas leader and locate tunnels that cross from Gaza into Israel. On Saturday, a group of Hamas fighters had used a tunnel to enter Israel and attack a military vehicle, killing two IDF officers.

Large numbers of civilians in Shuja'iya were caught up in the shelling and fighting. At least 62 were killed and some 400 wounded within hours. Observers reported thousands of people streaming out of the area and carrying casualties to the central Shifa hospital in Gaza City. Bodies were left lying in the streets. A short ceasefire in the afternoon, requested by the Red Cross so wounded civilians could be evacuated, was abandoned by the IDF less than an hour after it went into effect.

Among those killed were Palestinian photojournalist Khaled Hamad, 25, and ambulance driver Fouad Jaber, 28. The dead included 17 children, 14 women and 4 elderly men, according to Shifa Hospital director Naser Tattar. A missile strike on the home of prominent Hamas politician Khalil al-Hayya assassinated his daughter-in-law and two of his grandchildren. Hayya was not in the building.

Soldiers of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad engaged the advancing Israeli forces with anti-tank missiles and small arms fire, in what an Israeli officer described to the *Wall Street Journal* as "heavy fighting and close combat." The IDF suffered its heaviest casualties in a single day since it was sent into southern Lebanon in 2006 to attack the Shiite Hezbollah movement. Thirteen Israeli troops were killed and over 30 more wounded, including Golani Brigade commander, Colonel Rasan Alian. Hamas claimed to have captured a young Israeli soldier.

The IDF asserted early Monday morning that it found 10 tunnel entrances in Shuja'iya to an underground network that crossed under the border. The tunnels were developed as much to smuggle food and other supplies into the territory as to launch attacks on Israel. Gaza is subject to an economic blockade by Israel and since August 2013, the Egyptian military regime has blockaded the southern border crossing at Rafah. Yesterday, a convoy of 11 buses, filled with medical supplies and 550 Egyptians, including medical volunteers, was prevented by Egyptian troops from entering Gaza.

A harrowing account of the impact of the blockade and the attack on Shuja'iya was authored on the weekend by Dr Mads Gilbert, a Norwegian doctor working at the Shifa hospital. His letter was published on Sunday by the British *Independent* and other sources.

Gilbert wrote: "We still have lakes of blood on the floor in the emergency room, piles of dripping, blood-soaked bandages to clear out—oh—the cleaners, everywhere, swiftly shovelling the blood and discarded tissues, hair, clothes, cannulas—the leftovers from death—all taken away... to be prepared again, to be repeated all over. More than 100 cases came to Shifa in

the last 24 hours. Enough for a large well-trained hospital with everything, but here—almost nothing: electricity, water, disposables, drugs, operating-room tables, instruments, monitors—all rusted and as if taken from museums of yesterday's hospitals."

In an interview with *Al Jazeera* yesterday, Gilbert said Palestinians were asking: "How can the world accept the Israelis targeting civilians in an area which is completely shut off? There are no shelters, no early-warning systems, no sirens. The population is basically completely naked to the enormously strong Israeli military machine."

Dozens more Palestinians were killed and wounded in towns such as Atatra, Izbet Abed Rabbo, Beit Hanoun and Beit Lahiya, located just kilometres from the northern border with Israel. Leaflets dropped by the IDF warned people to abandon their homes and flee the area because "we will strike with an iron fist." As in Shuja'iya, the aim of the Israeli invasion appears to be to use terror, mass killings and indiscriminate destruction to depopulate the border region.

According to the Gaza Health Ministry, Palestinian casualties since July 8 now stand at 435 dead and at least 2,200 wounded. Over 80,000 civilians have fled their homes, mainly from the border towns, and are crammed into 61 understaffed, under-resourced and over-crowded United Nations shelters—mainly schools and other public buildings.

At least 50 percent of Gaza's 1.8 million people have no access to water at all, except bottled water brought in from outside. Gaza's water supply is contaminated as a result of Israeli attacks on sewage plants. Electricity is being supplied for barely four hours a day to those households that have not lost power altogether. There are desperate shortages of fuel—needed for everything from ambulances to hospital generators. Supplies of medicine and baby formula are being rapidly exhausted.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was not challenged as he blatantly defended his government's war crimes during media interviews yesterday. Speaking with the BBC, he blamed Palestinians for their own deaths, because they refused to abandon their homes. "We asked in every way for the civilian population to leave," he said. " Hamas told them not to so they could be used as human shields."

Many people did not leave because they have

nowhere safe to go, as Netanyahu made clear during an interview on the American ABC's "This Week" Sunday program. The Israeli leader repeated his government's assertion that essentially every building in Gaza is being used for "terrorism" and is therefore a legitimate target. "What Hamas is doing very cynically," Netanyahu declared, "is embedding its rocketeers, its rocket caches, its tunnels, these terror tunnels, in homes, in hospitals, in schools, and when we take action, as targeted as we can, they then use their civilians as human shields."

US Secretary of State John Kerry gave a blanket endorsement to Israel's atrocities in an interview with Fox News, despite having been caught off-air sarcastically ridiculing Netanyahu's claim that the assault on Gaza was "a pinpoint operation." On air, he justified the indiscriminate killings taking place, declaring "you [Israel] have a right to go in and take out those tunnels, we completely support that."



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