

Gaza death toll climbs over 1,800

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The death toll of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip continued to rise yesterday despite a partial, seven-hour ceasefire unilaterally declared by Israel and its armed forces. Shortly after it was meant to come into force, Israeli missiles struck a house in northern Gaza's Shati refugee camp, killing an eight-year-old girl and injuring 29 other people.

There was still fighting in the southern Gazan town of Rafah, which the Israeli military excluded from its self-declared ceasefire and where it said it wanted to destroy cross-border tunnels into Egypt and Israel. According to local officials, at least 20 Palestinians were killed yesterday, including two in an Israeli air strike next to a water desalination plant.

The overall Palestinian death toll since Israel launched its military onslaught on July 8 climbed to 1,865—80 percent of whom are civilians according to UN estimates. More than 9,000 people have been injured. About 460,000 people, out of a Gaza Strip population of 1.8 million, have been driven from their homes.

Much of the essential infrastructure in the small, crowded enclave, including its medical services, has been damaged or destroyed. According to the UN, a third of hospitals, 14 primary healthcare clinics and 29 ambulances have suffered damage. Hospitals and clinics lacking medicines and other essential supplies are trying to cope with the ongoing influx of dead, dying and injured.

Another 72-hour truce, agreed to by Israel and Hamas, the ruling party in the Gaza Strip, was due to commence this morning, local time. A similar ceasefire on Saturday collapsed within hours after Israel seized on a minor clash with Palestinian militants as the pretext to launch major operations deep into Rafah to destroy tunnels. Claims that Israeli soldiers were searching for a captured officer proved false. He was later declared killed in action.

After announcing that the objective of destroying tunnels was achieved, Israeli forces reportedly began pulling back to positions near the border or inside Israel. However, the latest truce could evaporate as quickly as the last. The Israeli government and military have exploited every previous pause in operations to regroup and prepare for the next stage of the assault on Gaza.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that the operation was continuing. "What is about to conclude is the IDF [Israel Defence Forces] action to deal with the tunnels, but this operation will end only when quiet and security are restored to the citizens of Israel for a lengthy period," he warned yesterday.

The Zionist regime launched its offensive into the Gaza Strip, not to prevent the firing of crude rockets by Palestinian militants into Israel or to uproot tunnel networks, but to terrorise the entire population in a bid to break the resistance of the Palestinian people. Netanyahu's statement makes clear that Israel will persist with its air strikes and shelling, targeted assassinations and various forms of collective punishment in order to achieve its war aims.

Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, leader of the extreme right Yisrael Beiteinu party, yesterday suggested that the Gaza Strip be placed under a UN mandate as part of a plan to disarm Hamas. The only other alternatives, he declared, were the military defeat of Hamas, or "a state of limbo: something undefined where they shoot and we react." He refused to countenance the last objective.

Palestinian officials ruled out a separate UN administration of the Gaza Strip—a move that would effectively split the Palestinian territories. The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), which governs the West Bank, did, however, acknowledge that it wrote to the UN calling for "protection for Palestine"—opening the door for foreign military

intervention. Spokesman Ashraf Khatib added only that the UN protection had to be “for all of Palestine, including the West Bank, Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip.”

The latest 72-hour truce was brokered by the Egyptian military junta, which is holding discussions with Palestinian representatives in Cairo. Israel, however, effectively ruled out any negotiations and flatly rejected demands to end the Israeli-Egyptian economic blockade of the Gaza Strip.

Referring to Hamas, Israeli Justice Minister Tzipi Livni declared yesterday: “You want to talk about lifting the siege? Not with us, and not now.” Speaking to Army Radio, she suggested that Israel should consider constructing a massive underground barrier to prevent future tunnelling and ensure that the entry of goods, including food, medicines and other essential items, was completely under the control of Israel and Egypt.

The Israeli regime is counting on the Egyptian junta, which seized power by ousting President Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood leader, to impose harsh conditions on any continuing ceasefire. Unlike Morsi, the Egyptian military is hostile to Hamas. A senior Israeli official told the *New York Times*: “The ability of Hamas to bring stuff in is much, much more limited. And because the Gaza tunnels are mostly shut down, the Egyptians have leverage with reopening Rajah [the border crossing].”

The Obama administration declared its support for the ceasefire. State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki urged “both parties to respect it completely.” Such gestures of neutrality, like US expressions of concern over the slaughter in Gaza, are completely cynical, as Washington’s denunciations of Hamas for allegedly breaking the last 72-hour ceasefire last Saturday demonstrate.

The Israeli government is quite capable of tearing up the latest truce, no matter how threadbare its excuse for doing so, knowing that it would retain the Obama administration’s unequivocal support. Israel could seize on any pretext, whether inside the Gaza Strip or elsewhere, to resume its murderous operations, which have fuelled outrage internationally and across the occupied Palestinian territories.

Yesterday in Jerusalem, an industrial digging machine, reportedly driven by a Palestinian, ran over

and killed an Israeli man, then rammed a bus in an ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighbourhood, before the driver was shot dead. Elsewhere, an Israeli soldier was shot in the stomach by a gunman who rode off on a motorbike.

Such incidents whipped up in the Israeli press, and amplified in the US and international media, can readily become the basis for a renewed slaughter.



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