Israeli regime continues bombardment of Gaza as ground offensive looms and threat of regional war grows

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The Israeli regime continued its savage bombardment of Gaza Thursday, striking targets in the south, where over one million Palestinians were ordered by Israel to flee last week, as well as in the north.

On Thursday night, the Israeli military bombed a Greek Orthodox church in Gaza City, where dozens of Palestinian families had sought refuge from the murderous air attacks on civilian targets. As of this writing, the death toll in the bombardment of the St. Porphyrius Greek Orthodox Church had risen to eight, with dozens more reported wounded.

Women and children were among those killed in the attack on the church, located in the al-Zaytoun neighborhood of Gaza City, according to the Palestinian news agency WAFA. Rescuers were continuing to pull people out of the rubble and the toll of dead and wounded was expected to rise.

The *Wall Street Journal* quoted Majdy Jildah, who had sought refuge at the church, as saying that some 500 people had been sheltering on the church campus, including some 80 in the church council building where the explosion occurred. Dozens were inside the assembly hall of the church, which was also damaged.

The church is one of the oldest in the world. The Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem issued its "strongest condemnation" of the attack, stating that "targeting churches and their institutions, along with the shelters they provide to protect innocent citizens, especially children and women who have lost their homes due to Israeli air strikes on residential areas over the past 13 days, constitutes a war crime."

Al Jazeera quoted one survivor of the church bombing as saying, "Where do I go now? There is no place to live."

The church bombing came less than three days after Israel bombed the al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City, killing close to 500 Palestinians, and a day after US President Biden embraced Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and declared Washington's full support for the genocidal war on Gaza.

Underscoring the increasing threat of a broader conflagration throughout the region, fighting also escalated throughout the day on Israel's northern border with Lebanon, and US military facilities have come under attack in Syria and Iraq.

Israeli air strikes in Gaza killed 33 people near the Rafah border crossing with Egypt and 11 family members in a house in Khan Younis. In the north, near the border with Israel, the Palestinian Health Ministry reported the deaths of 18 people following an attack on the Jabalia refugee camp, Gaza's largest, and home to some 160,000 people.

Prime Minister Netanyahu gave one of the strongest indications yet that a ground offensive into Gaza, which threatens to claim the lives of tens of thousands of Palestinians, is imminent. Addressing the elite Golani Brigade of soldiers at an assembly point on the border with Gaza, he declared, "I am here with Golani soldiers from all parts of the country. They have fought like lions and will fight like lions. We are going to win with full force." He also participated in a meeting of the security cabinet, which would need to give the go-ahead for a ground incursion.

Earlier in the day, Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, who gained notoriety in the first days of Israel's genocidal onslaught for his description of the Palestinians as "human animals," told soldiers that they would "soon" see Gaza "from inside." Maj. Gen. Yaron Finkelman, head of the Israeli Defence Force's southern command, asserted that the ground invasion would be "difficult, long and intense"

The impending escalation of the 12-day murderous assault on Gaza, which according to the Palestinian health ministry has already claimed the lives of 3,785 Palestinians, is taking place with the unequivocal endorsement of the United States and its European imperialist allies. The final preparations by Netanyahu and the military for the ground invasion came just 24 hours after US President Joe Biden visited Israel, embraced Netanyahu, and reiterated Washington's unconditional support for the massacring of Gaza's 2.3 million people. The visit followed Israel's cold-blooded slaughter of close to 500 men, women and children Tuesday when it bombed the al-Ahli Arab Hospital, a war crime under international law.

Emphasizing the unanimous support within the American political establishment for Israeli war crimes, the Senate adopted a resolution by 97 votes to 0 yesterday that reaffirmed Israel's "right to self-defence." The resolution also committed Washington to restock Israel's weapons supplies so that it can continue its onslaught for as long as it desires, and impose tougher sanctions on Iran to combat its support for "terror proxies."

Visitors from the major imperialist powers continued to arrive in Israel Thursday to give their stamp of approval for the Netanyahu regime's genocidal onslaught. British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak

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declared, “We want you to win,” while German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius met with Gallant to pledge Berlin’s assistance.

The air bombardment, a vicious act of collective punishment for the mass Palestinian uprising led by Hamas against the Israeli occupation on October 7, has already laid waste to Gaza. According to the latest United Nations Organisation for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs report, 25 percent of the territory’s residential buildings, amounting to 98,000 housing units, have been destroyed. There have been 59 attacks on health care facilities, including 17 hospitals and 23 ambulances, killing 491 people, 16 of whom were on-duty health care workers. The bombardments have hit 170 educational facilities, and severely damaged the territory’s sanitation and water infrastructure.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called for a “ceasefire” in Gaza Thursday as he announced plans from Egypt for an aid convoy to bring much-needed supplies to the enclave Friday. Israel cut off fuel, water, and electricity to the Gaza Strip almost two weeks ago and has prevented aid from entering, with the support of the El-Sisi dictatorship in Cairo.

A damning statement issued by two UN special rapporteurs explicitly warned that Israel’s actions in Gaza and the West Bank threaten genocide. Pedro Arrojo Agudo, the UN’s special rapporteur on human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, and Francesca Albanese, the special rapporteur for human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, wrote, “The complete siege of Gaza coupled with unfeasible evacuation orders and forcible population transfers, is a violation of international humanitarian and criminal law. It is also unspeakably cruel.

“We are sounding the alarm: There is an ongoing campaign by Israel resulting in crimes against humanity in Gaza.”

The statement also denounced the bombing of the al-Ahli Hospital as an “atrocity.”

In the occupied West Bank, Israeli forces have killed dozens of Palestinians in the past two weeks. The deaths of seven Palestinians and one Israeli were reported yesterday alone during clashes in a refugee camp. A 16-year-old boy was shot by soldiers during a raid on the occupied Palestinian town of Tulkarem, where Israeli soldiers also shot at and seized a Palestinian Red Crescent ambulance.

The UN special rapporteurs concluded, “Considering statements made by Israeli political leaders and their allies, accompanied by military action in Gaza and escalation of arrests and killing in the West Bank, there is also a risk of genocide against the Palestine people.”

The war is rapidly escalating beyond Gaza. On the border with Lebanon, Hezbollah claimed responsibility for firing 20 rockets into northern Israel Thursday. Israeli soldiers and Hezbollah fighters also exchanged fire throughout the afternoon. An IDF spokesman warned that Hezbollah will “bear the consequences” of the rocket strikes, suggesting that expanded operations in Lebanon are also only a matter of time.

In a separate incident, a Lebanese citizen accompanying a group of journalists near the border was killed by Israeli gunfire. The United States and Britain ordered their citizens to leave Lebanon while flights “remain available.”

Later Thursday, the IDF announced it had carried out air strikes against Hezbollah targets in southern Lebanon. An attack helicopter also struck a group of fighters preparing to launch anti-tank guided missiles into Israel.

A US navy destroyer in the Red Sea intercepted three missiles fired from Yemen that were heading northwards. The Pentagon stated that the missiles were “potentially” heading for Israel and “posed a potential threat.” Pentagon spokesman Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder added ominously that the US is prepared to do whatever is necessary “to protect our partners and our interests in this important region.”

The US al-Tanf military base in southern Syria near the border with Iraq came under attack from drones Wednesday. Meanwhile, three attacks took place against American military facilities inside Iraq since Tuesday, including two targeting the Ain al-Asad base with drones and missiles.

The Biden administration has already dispatched two aircraft-carrier battlegroups to the region, which are clearly designed to create the conditions for the waging of a broader war against Iran. Each battlegroup includes 8,000 sailors, airmen, and marines, and dozens of fighter aircraft. In remarks in a “60 Minutes” interview, Biden explicitly linked the Gaza war to broader regional conflicts, stating, “Going in and taking out the extremists, Hezbollah is up north but Hamas down south, is a necessary requirement. Iran constantly supports Hamas and Hezbollah.”

What is developing across the region is the Middle East front in the US-led global imperialist war to secure its hegemony against its strategic rivals, above all Russia and China. The imperialists’ unreserved support for the Israeli government’s brutal massacre of the Gaza population goes hand-in-hand with the reckless escalation of the war with Russia in Ukraine by Washington and its European allies, which has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands on both sides. Biden’s remarks from the White House Thursday evening, in which he called for military support to Israel and Ukraine and asserted that ”American leadership is what holds the world together,” demonstrate that the US capitalist class is determined to wage a war against the world.

The only force capable of putting a stop to this madness is the international working class. The spontaneous protests that have erupted the world over in response to the US-backed Israeli war crimes must link up with the mass social struggles of the working class against austerity and in defence of living standards that have swept across Europe and North America over recent months. This requires the adoption of a socialist and internationalist programme to put an end to imperialist war and the capitalist profit system that gives rise to it.

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