

Netanyahu reaffirms support for Rafah ground onslaught amid growth of starvation across Gaza

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu restated Thursday the intention of his fascistic government to unleash a bloody onslaught of Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, where some 1.5 million Palestinians are enduring horrendous conditions. As Israel's genocide against the Palestinians enters its sixth month, the impending ground invasion will further deepen an already catastrophic humanitarian situation for the enclave's 2.3 million inhabitants, with widespread starvation and deaths from preventable diseases a daily reality.

The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) will operate against "all of Hamas' battalions throughout the Strip," Netanyahu told a graduation ceremony for army cadets. "Whoever tells us not to operate in Rafah is telling us to lose the war—and that will not happen," he added ominously. Threatening to instigate a wider regional conflict, he continued, "At the same time, we will take vigorous action in the other sectors, against whoever seeks to destroy us, including on the northern front. Whoever has not yet been convinced by our strength would do well to look at what is happening to the enemy strongholds in Gaza."

Underscoring his threats, Netanyahu's remarks came the same day as several Israeli air strikes hit targets in southern Lebanon and Syria. Meanwhile, the grinding slaughter continued in Gaza, with the Health Ministry reporting another 83 deaths from IDF attacks in the previous 24 hours.

Netanyahu's aggressive remarks came on the heels of a visit by War Cabinet Minister Benny Gantz to Washington, where he held consultations with Vice President Kamala Harris, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Secretary of State Antony Blinken earlier this week. While media coverage of his trip was dominated by Netanyahu's opposition to it, above all due to their domestic political rivalry, readouts of the meetings make clear that discussions focused on Israel's planned onslaught. Just over two weeks ago, Gantz warned that a ground invasion would be launched at the beginning of Ramadan on 10 March if the

remaining hostages under Hamas' control were not released.

The White House stated after a meeting between Harris and Gantz Monday that the Vice President "reiterated US support for Israel's right to defend itself in the face of ongoing Hamas terrorist threats and underscored our unwavering commitment to Israel's security." The following day, Politico reported, based on the comments of three US officials, "The Biden administration is not planning to punish Israel if it launches a military campaign in Rafah without ensuring civilian safety."

No doubt emboldened by these unconditional assurances of support, Netanyahu's government confirmed the approval Wednesday of 3,500 illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank, where Palestinians have been terrorised by IDF raids and vigilante violence by far-right settlers.

Reports Thursday indicated that negotiations mediated by Egypt and Qatar to secure a six-week "ceasefire" in exchange for the release by Hamas of 40 hostages have broken down. The Hamas delegation left Cairo and declared in a statement that they would resume talks next week after consulting with their organisation's leadership. Washington has claimed publicly that it believes an agreement in the coming days remains possible.

CIA Director William Burns is travelling to the region, where he will visit Cairo and Israel for consultations with the Netanyahu government, according to Israel's Channel 12. His visit is ostensibly aimed at finalizing the agreement, but the preparations for the IDF's assault on Rafah will undoubtedly be discussed.

The Biden administration has been deeply implicated in every stage of Israel's genocide against the Palestinians. Netanyahu, Gantz and the IDF leadership have felt able to proceed so ruthlessly and in flagrant violation of international law because they know that they enjoy the unrestrained support of Washington and its European allies.

The imperialists have seized on the Gaza genocide as an opportunity to put long-standing plans for the restructuring

of the entire Middle East into practice by targeting Iran and its allies throughout the region. American imperialism is determined to consolidate its dominance over the energy-rich Middle East against its rivals, above all, China and Russia. All methods, genocide included, are considered legitimate by the ruling class in pursuit of this agenda.

The prospect of a further intensification of Israel's genocide against the Palestinians looms as the humanitarian disaster across the enclave deepens. Over a quarter of Gaza's population is "one step" away from famine, according to the United Nations. Just six out of 24 planned aid convoys for the northern Gaza Strip in February were approved by Israel.

UNICEF reports that one in six children in the north of the Strip is acutely malnourished, which poses both an imminent risk of death and long-term health issues for those who survive. As Omar Abdel-Mannon, co-founder of the Health Workers for Palestine organisation, told al-Jazeera, periods of starvation for young children in particular can result in permanent and irreversible damage to organs, including the heart, liver and kidneys.

Israel's systematic and deliberate use of starvation as a weapon of war is well documented. Netanyahu's far-right government has massively restricted the flow of aid into Gaza to a fraction of what it was prior to 7 October. Less than 100 trucks have reached Gaza on a daily basis, compared to 500 prior to Israel's onslaught. Israeli officials have openly discussed the benefits of restricting food aid and allowing disease to spread to facilitate Israel's ultimate goal of ethnically cleansing Gaza to set the stage for Israeli settlements.

UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons, Paula Gaviria Betancur, issued Wednesday a searing critique of Israel's total disregard of the rights of civilians since the bombardment began, noting, "Israel's evacuation orders have not made the people of Gaza safer; on the contrary, they have been used to forcibly transfer and confine the civilian population in unliveable conditions..."

"Although Rafah has already come under periodic attack by Israeli forces, a full-scale ground assault would lead to unimaginable suffering. Any evacuation order imposed on Rafah under the current conditions, with the rest of Gaza lying in ruins, would be in flagrant violation of international humanitarian and human rights law, forcing people to flee to conditions of certain death—deprived of food, water, healthcare and shelter."

Citing the "flour massacre" in Gaza City, in which at least 115 Palestinians died after IDF soldiers opened fire on a crowd waiting for aid, she concluded, "I am horrified by the depravity of killing civilians while they are at their most

vulnerable and seeking basic assistance. These constitute atrocity crimes of the highest order."

The aid organisation Refugees International reported that Israel has "consistently and groundlessly" blocked aid into Gaza, while conducting "persistent attacks on Gaza's humanitarian, health, food, power, and other critical infrastructure."

Jean-Pierre Delomier, deputy director of Handicap International—Humanity & Inclusion, criticised the hypocrisy of the much publicised air drops of tiny amounts of aid into northern Gaza by US aircraft, which carried out the second drop in a week Thursday. "I saw kilometres of trucks queueing on four lanes, all waiting to get into Gaza," he commented after an eight-day mission to the enclave. "Planes fly over to drop a few pallets, whereas just behind [the border fence] there are kilometres of pallets waiting that could just be let in."

In a widely reported development Thursday, US President Joe Biden announced in his State of the Union address that the US will construct a temporary port on the Gaza coast to allow ships with humanitarian aid to dock. Compared to the numerous shiploads and planeloads of high-powered weaponry that have made their way from Washington to Israel since October, this gesture amounts to nothing more than a slap in the face for Gaza's desperate population. Moreover, reports indicate that it will take several weeks to make the facility operational, by which time many more preventable deaths will have occurred and Israel will likely have launched its onslaught on Rafah.

One of the ways Israel has sought to cover up its brutal massacre and starvation of the Palestinians in Gaza has been through the targeted killing of journalists and media workers, well over 100 of whom have been slaughtered since October. In a report released Thursday into Israel's 13 October killing of a Reuters journalist on the Israel-Lebanon border, the Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research observed, "It is considered a likely scenario that a Merkava tank, after firing two tank rounds, also used its machine gun against the location of the journalists."

AFP's Global News Director Phil Chetwynd stated in response, "If reports of sustained machine gun fire are confirmed, this would add more weight to the theory this was a targeted and deliberate attack."



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