

Netanyahu and Gallant declare Israeli ground invasion of Rafah imminent

Thomas Scripps
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“Those who think we are delaying [the invasion of Rafah] will soon see that there is no place we cannot reach,” threatened Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant on a visit to army officers in the occupied Gaza City on Wednesday. “There is no safe space, not here, not outside Gaza, not across the entire Middle East.”

Gallant’s declaration that an invasion of Rafah is imminent confirms Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s bellicose response Sunday, when asked about the refugee city housing over a million Palestinians, “We’ll go there. We’re not going to leave them. You know, I have a red line. You know what the red line is? That October 7 doesn’t happen again. Never happens again...”

“We’ve destroyed three-quarters of Hamas’ fighting terrorism battalions. And we’re close to finishing the last part in warfare.”

Speaking by video link to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee on Tuesday, Netanyahu reiterated, “We will finish the job in Rafah.”

Making clear that no death toll was too high, he declared, “Israel will win this war no matter what. To win this war, we must destroy the remaining Hamas battalions in Rafah... You cannot say you support Israel’s right to exist and to defend itself and then oppose Israel when it exercises that right.”

He told Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte on Wednesday, in the words of the *Times of Israel*, “An IDF [Israel Defense Forces] operation in Rafah is necessary to achieve Israel’s war aims against Hamas”.

Gallant and Netanyahu’s comments lay bare the reality hidden behind a veil of “cautions” and “warnings” from Israel’s imperialist patrons. United States President Joe Biden told reporters this weekend that Netanyahu “must pay more attention to the innocent lives being lost,” adding “he’s hurting Israel more than helping Israel.” This sparked the customary speculation in the liberal

media about “red lines” from Washington. But US support for the Israeli war machine was never in doubt.

National Security advisor Jake Sullivan stated bluntly on Tuesday, “the reports that purport to describe the president’s thinking are uninformed speculation.” Biden’s only professed concern with “smashing into Rafah,” Sullivan continued, is that an entirely fictitious “credible plan to deal with the population there” be drawn up, purely for public consumption.

Reports of Biden’s comments followed days of media speculation about a Ramadan ceasefire, for which the Israeli negotiators did not even bother to visit Cairo for discussions and which Qatari mediators now admit is “not near” an agreement.

On the ground, combat operations killing and maiming scores of Palestinians continued for the third consecutive day of the Islamic festival. Among them was a strike on a United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) food distribution centre in Rafah, killing one staff member and wounding another 22. UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini commented, “Today’s attack on one of the very few remaining UNRWA distribution centres in the Gaza Strip comes as food supplies are running out, hunger is widespread and, in some areas, turning into famine.

“Every day, we share the coordinates of all our facilities across the Gaza Strip with parties to the conflict. The Israeli army received the coordinates including of this facility yesterday.”

More than 400 people, many of them children, have now been killed while sheltering in United Nations facilities in Gaza, 157 of which have been hit by Israeli fire. Lazzarini had pointed out earlier in the day that more children were killed in Gaza in the four months to this February (over 12,300) than in all wars around the world combined in the four years 2019-2022.

At least 113 of those children have been killed by Israeli

security forces and far-right militias in the occupied West Bank, where Israel is again stepping up its assault on the Palestinians.

Netanyahu has ordered the prisons to prepare for a new influx of detainees, on top of the 9,000 Palestinians already held. Muthafar Thouqan, coordinator of the committee to support Palestinian prisoners, told *Al Jazeera* that 12 have died in detention since October 7 “due to torture and medical neglect”.

Raids in the last two days, including on the Jenin and Shuafat refugee camps and the town of al-Jib, have added to the toll of over 427 Palestinians killed in the West Bank since October 7, with homes demolished, roads bulldozed, power lines torn down, water pipes burst and hospitals shot at.

The Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs commented, “In 24 hours, the Israeli occupation has killed six Palestinians, including children. These are war crimes and crimes against humanity according to international law.

“The political and military echelon has enabled soldiers and settlers to shoot at Palestinian citizens who do not endanger them in any way. It is obvious that this escalation is proof that the governing coalition is adding fuel to the fire to expand the cycle of violence.”

The murdered child, 12-year-old Rami Hamdan al-Halhouli, was shot in the chest by a police officer. The security forces claimed he had launched fireworks directly at them, but footage shows them being fired into the air. The officer has been questioned by the Department of Internal Police Investigations, prompting fascist Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir to declare his solidarity with the murderer: “This is exactly how you should act against terrorists—with determination and precision.”

Israeli military activity is also being escalated against Lebanon, where two people were killed and 12 wounded in strikes deep into the country’s territory on Wednesday. Fighter jets also launched missiles against Nabi Shayth and Saraain, 100 kilometres north of the Israel-Lebanon border on Monday, destroying a three-storey building, killing one person and wounding eight others.

Lebanon’s Foreign Ministry has announced its intention to file a complaint with the United Nations Security Council, denouncing increasingly violent attacks on targets within residential areas and warning, “What is particularly concerning is that this escalation is occurring in areas far from the southern Lebanese borders, indicating Israel’s desire to escalate the conflict and drag the entire region into a war.”

Over 220 Hezbollah fighters and nearly 40 civilians have been killed in Lebanon since the latest fighting began.

As for cynical posturing by the imperialist powers over the provision of humanitarian aid, the World Food Programme announced that its delivery of food to Gaza City this Tuesday was the “first successful convoy to the north since 20 February,” and provided enough for just 25,000 people. “With people in northern Gaza on the brink of famine, we need deliveries every day,” the organisation commented.

Twenty-five aid groups and human rights organisations, including Oxfam and Doctors Without Borders, have criticised the much-fêted air and maritime aid routes as a façade: “States cannot hide behind airdrops and efforts to open a maritime corridor to create the illusion that they are doing enough to support the needs in Gaza. Their primary responsibility is to prevent atrocity crimes from unfolding and apply effective political pressure to end the relentless bombardment and the restrictions which prevent the safe delivery of humanitarian aid.”

Gazans, they continue, “have the right to more than meagre charity dropped from the sky.” One airdrop caused the deaths of five people and injured 10 others last week. “Families are starving and do not have the time for offshore and ashore infrastructure to be constructed: saving their lives requires immediately allowing the humanitarian trucks full of food and medicine whose entry in Gaza is currently being withheld.”

The European Union’s foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell has acknowledged, “Starvation is being used as a war arm.” He explained, “When we look for alternative ways of providing support, by sea or by air, we have to remind that we have to do it because the natural way of providing support through roads is being closed, artificially closed.”



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