US/Israeli talks in Washington to plot offensive in Rafah

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As the Israeli military is poised to escalate its genocide in Gaza with a long-planned offensive in the southern city of Rafah, Defence Minister Yoav Gallant has left for talks in Washington with top US officials. Last Friday, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made clear that the barbaric operation into the city crammed with 1.5 million Palestinian refugees will proceed.

Amid ongoing international outrage and protests against the Israeli genocide, the Biden administration has expressed concerns about the Rafah offensive. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Netanyahu in Israel last Friday and warned that the operation "risks further isolating Israel around the world and jeopardising its long-term security." Vice President Kamila Harris told ABC's "This Week" on Sunday that any military operation into Rafah "would be a huge mistake" and dropped a hint that there would be "consequences" for Israel.

These meaningless expressions of concern are simply window dressing for behind-the-scenes talks that will focus on how, not if, the Israeli war in Gaza is going to reach a bloody climax in Rafah. The Biden administration, which regards the conflict as part of a wider war in the Middle East targeting Iran, has backed Israel to the hilt—politically, financially and militarily with the supply of huge quantities of arms.

Gallant's comments prior to his departure only underscored the character of the upcoming talks with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, Secretary of State Blinken and national security adviser Jake Sullivan. "During my visit, I will focus on preserving Israel's qualitative military edge and on ways to achieve our common goals: victory over Hamas and returning the hostages home," he said in a statement issued by his office.

As well as focussing on Israel's "ability to obtain platforms and munitions," Gallant signalled that he and US top officials would discuss the opening of a new military front in southern Lebanon against Iranian-backed Hezbollah. The conflict has been underway and escalating since the Israeli war in Gaza began, involving Israeli strikes deep inside Lebanon as well as in the border area with Israel. Tens of thousands have been displaced.

The top figures in the Zionist regime in Israel have been pressing for a military offensive against Hezbollah to drive its militia forces back from the border. "We will also discuss the need to return Israel's northern communities to their homes, whether this is achieved via military action or via agreement," Gallant said. Given that Israel knows that its demands for Hezbollah to pull back some 30 kilometres from the border are completely unacceptable, what will be discussed involves a dramatic escalation of the conflict into Lebanon.

The desperate situation for the Palestinians in Gaza only intensified on Sunday as the Israeli military stepped up its onslaught and Israeli authorities told the UN that the UN refugee agency, UNRWA, would no longer be allowed to send food convoys into northern Gaza. "As of today, UNRWA, the main lifeline for Palestine refugees, is denied from providing lifesaving assistance to northern Gaza," UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini wrote in a post on Twitter/X.

Lazzarini demanded that the restrictions be lifted, declaring: "This is outrageous & makes it intentional to obstruct lifesaving assistance during a man-made famine… By preventing UNRWA to fulfill its mandate in Gaza, the clock will tick faster towards famine & many more will die of hunger, dehydration + lack of

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shelter. This cannot happen, it would only stain our collective humanity."

The cynicism of the Biden administration's expressions of concern for the plight of Palestinian refugees was underscored by its lack of funding for the UNRWA. The newly passed US foreign aid spending bills puts severe limits on funding for the UN agency until at least March 2025. Lazzarini emphasised the urgency for assistance declaring that humanitarian agencies were in a race against time to avoid famine. Any gap in funding would undermine access to food, shelter, primary health care and education at an extremely difficult time.

After visiting Egypt's border with Gaza at the Rafah crossing on Saturday, UN Secretary General António Guterres reiterated his call for a ceasefire. "Looking at Gaza, it almost appears that the four horsemen of war, famine, conquest and death are galloping across it," he said, adding that nothing justifies the collective punishment of Palestinians.

Having been at the border where some 7,000 aid trucks are waiting for Israeli approval to enter Gaza, Guterres declared that the starvation being inflicted on Palestinians was a "moral outrage". He called on Israel to remove the "obstacles and chokepoints to relief," saying: "Palestinians in Gaza desperately need what has been promised: a flood of aid… not trickles, not drops."

Even before Gallant's talks in Washington begin, the Israeli military is intensifying its assault in southern Gaza. The Israeli military carried out around 40 strikes in the al-Amal neighbourhood in Khan Younis to the north of Rafah while its troops were "encircling the area and continuing to eliminate" alleged Hamas militants. It also sent tanks into the al-Qarara area in northern Khan Younis, backed by airstrikes.

The Palestine Red Crescent Society reported on Sunday that Israeli forces were "besieging" al-Amal Hospital in Khan Younis. It stated that the military was using bulldozers and smoke bombs around the hospital and demanding that everyone inside evacuate. A PRCS emergency services volunteer in the facility reported "intense and continuous shelling", as well as "continuous gunfire." He was later killed by Israeli gunfire.

In Gaza City, the Israeli siege of the al-Shifa Hospital continued on Sunday despite calls by Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director general of the World Health Organization, on Thursday to halt the attacks that have cut off access to the facility. "We repeat once again: hospitals are not battlegrounds. They must be protected in line with international humanitarian law." The Israeli military declared that it has detained 480 "suspects" for interrogation including health workers.

According to the Gaza Health Ministry, at least 32,226 people have been killed and 74,518 injured in Gaza since the war began. That figure will only increase dramatically as Israeli forces mount their offensive into Rafah.

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