

Israeli military threatens ground invasion of Lebanon amid expanding air assault

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Top Israeli army officers told soldiers to prepare for a ground invasion of Lebanon as the air assault on the country to the north continued for a third day. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said the aerial bombardment included attacks on more than 280 targets that it claimed were tied to Hezbollah.

Israeli air strikes killed 81 people across the country on Wednesday, according to the Lebanese health ministry. The strikes killed 38 people in southern Lebanon, 12 in the eastern Bekaa region, and 22 in three towns north and south of the capital, Beirut. Nearly 400 people were wounded.

The latest air assault expanded the zones in Lebanon that Israel has been targeting, including the beach resort of Jiyeh, just south of Beirut. The total death toll in Lebanon is approaching 650 people from the relentless air assault of the past three days.

In Beirut, thousands of people displaced from southern Lebanon are sheltering in schools and other buildings.

Lebanon's health minister, Dr. Firass Abiad, told Sky News that there will be "easily" half a million people displaced in Lebanon due to the bombings. Dr. Abiad said he expects the number to surpass that of the 2006 Lebanon war, during which between 600,000 and 800,000 people were displaced.

A report from the Associated Press included an eyewitness account of a strike in the Bekaa Valley:

"At Dar Al Amal hospital in the city of Baalbek in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, Soumaya Moussawi was lying in bed with her head bandaged and face bruised Wednesday. She had been sitting outside with family members when warplanes started striking in the distance," she said.

"Then suddenly it hit next to us—we were all thrown in different directions," she said. "My two cousins and

my father were killed, and my other cousin is in a dangerous condition."

Moussawi insisted that there was no military site near them. She said she is trying to "remain strong" in her father's memory.

The United Nations reported that two of its staff members in Lebanon were killed during the ongoing air assault. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) identified the individuals in a statement as Dina Darwiche and Ali Basma.

Darwiche was killed with her young son after their home was "hit by an Israeli missile." She had worked for UNHCR for 12 years in its Bekaa office. Basma worked as a cleaner in the organization's Tyre office for seven years, but the statement did not specify how he was killed.

UNHCR said it was "outraged and deeply saddened" by the deaths and called for "urgent de-escalation" and the protection of "civilians, including aid workers, in line with obligations under international humanitarian law."

Lieutenant General Herzi Halevi, chief of staff of the IDF, told soldiers on Wednesday to prepare for a possible ground invasion of Lebanon. He said they would "go in, destroy the enemy there and decisively destroy" Hezbollah's infrastructure. Israel also called up two reservist brigades.

Addressing troops on Israel's northern border, Halevi said, "You hear the jets overhead; we have been striking all day. This is both to prepare the ground for your possible entry and to continue degrading Hezbollah."

The lieutenant general added, "Today, Hezbollah expanded its range of fire, and later today, they will receive a very strong response. Prepare yourselves." He said, "we are preparing the process of a maneuver."

During a visit to Israeli soldiers carrying out exercises near the Lebanese border, the head of Israel's Northern Command also said the war has "entered a new phase." Major General Ori Gordin said, "We need to change the security situation, and we must be fully prepared for maneuvers and action," according to a statement released Wednesday.

The threat to invade Lebanon followed Hezbollah's launching of a long-range missile toward Tel Aviv. Israel said its air defense system intercepted the missile before impact.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the IDF will continue "inflicting blows on Hezbollah" until displaced Israeli citizens can return to their homes. In a video statement released on Wednesday, Netanyahu said, "I cannot detail everything we are doing, but I can tell you one thing: We are determined to return our residents in the north safely to their homes," adding, "we will not rest until they come home."

The statement by Netanyahu echoes similar statements he has made throughout the genocide against Palestinians in Gaza regarding the pursuit of "total victory" and cynically using the Israeli hostages as justification.

Meanwhile, the murderous assault on Gaza continued on Wednesday with Israeli air strikes on Rafah. The *Washington Post* reported that Palestinian Civil Defense workers screamed into pockets of rubble, searching for survivors following an Israeli strike on a multi-story building in the southern-most city in Gaza.

According to Gaza's Civil Defense spokesman Mahmoud Basal, at least three people were killed and several injured in the attack. Basal told the *Post* in a phone call that more than 50 people died on Tuesday in strikes across Gaza. He said that as Israeli forces have turned their attention to Lebanon, the pace of Israeli attacks on Gaza has intensified.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken sought to disguise the Biden administration's support for Israel's assault on Lebanon by claiming that Tel Aviv and Hezbollah needed to pull back and avoid all-out war as disastrous for the region and its people.

During a visit to New York for the UN General Assembly, Blinken claimed on Wednesday that the US was working to "de-escalate tensions" and allow tens of thousands of Israelis and Lebanese to return to homes they have had to evacuate due to the intensifying

assault.

However, in an appearance on NBC's "Today" program, Blinken endorsed the Israeli terrorist pager attack on Lebanon that maimed thousands. When asked whether the pager bombs were "a form of terrorism and it went too far," Blinken said, "It's very legitimate that Israel do something about Hezbollah."

When a CBS News reporter asked Blinken about a report by ProPublica that two US government agencies concluded Israel is deliberately and illegally blocking aid to Gaza, and the secretary of state ignored them and falsely told Congress otherwise, Blinken shrugged it off. He said it was a "pretty typical" episode in which it was necessary to "sort through" some "different assessments" and "draw some conclusions."



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