

Israel maintains offensive in Gaza and the West Bank

By Rick Kelly
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Israel continues to pound Gaza and the West Bank with a daily barrage of artillery shells, missile strikes, and assassinations and arrests of alleged militants. While Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's government has agreed to a ceasefire in Lebanon, it has given no indication that it intends to suspend its criminal offensive in Gaza. The Israeli Defence Forces' (IDF) "Operation Summer Rains" is now in its ninth week. With the full backing of the Bush administration, Tel Aviv aims to obliterate what remains of Palestinian economic and social infrastructure and terrorise the defenceless population into submission.

Israel's siege of Gaza has led to the collapse of the local economy. The UN's World Food Program (WFP) issued a statement yesterday warning of a humanitarian crisis. "The economy is really reaching rock bottom," Arnold Vercken, the WFP's director in the Occupied Territories, declared. "Industries which were once the backbone of Gaza's economy and food system, such as the agriculture and fishing industries, are suffocated by the current situation and risk losing all viability."

Gaza's air, sea, and land borders are patrolled by Israel, and the Olmert government has blocked almost all non-emergency imports and exports into the area. The embargo, combined with numerous Israeli bombing attacks on agricultural land, irrigation pipes and greenhouses, has devastated the farming sector. Gaza's 35,000 fishermen have been unemployed since late June, after Israel banned all fishing. Other industries and factories have shut down and relocated to Egypt and the Gulf states.

Mounting poverty and the increasing shortage of affordable foodstuffs have led to warnings of malnutrition and hunger. "In contrast to Lebanon, where humanitarian food aid needs have been essentially met, the growing number of poor in Gaza

are living on the bare minimum and face a daily struggle to cover their daily food needs," the WFP reported. About 70 percent of the people are deemed "food insecure" and the vast majority depend on UN assistance to cover their basic needs. "WFP food assistance is acting as a band aid in an attempt to prevent a further decline of livelihoods and nutrition among the poorest," Vercken admitted.

Many humanitarian organisations in Gaza have sounded the alarm. On August 24, the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) warned that its work among Palestinian refugees was "grinding to a halt" because of the Israeli blockade. Israel's destruction of Gaza's power plant on June 28 had cut electricity supplies by 60 percent, and the agency's power generators were almost out of fuel, threatening the functioning of 18 UNRWA health centres.

The UN is also responsible for running schools catering for 194,000 children. The blockade has prevented the supply of construction materials needed to repair damaged facilities. "The work to repair the schools damaged in the military operations over the past two months is not finished as supplies have run out," John Ging, the UNRWA's director of operations in Gaza, said. "Children are once again paying the price in this conflict... Gaza is heading down the tubes. We are now down to a subsistence existence."

The next school term begins on September 2, but few schools are likely to be able to accept students. The teachers' union has announced that its members will not return to work unless they receive salary payments, which have been suspended since February. Teachers comprise about a quarter of the Palestinian Authority's (PA) 160,000 employees, most of whom have been unpaid since the US and European Union cut off aid to the PA following Hamas's victory in January's

legislative election. The PA is now bankrupt and no longer operates in any real sense. Israel has kidnapped more than 30 Hamas members of the legislature and four cabinet ministers.

Israel has also continued to steal Palestinian taxes and customs revenue usually worth more than \$US50 million each month. The Olmert government's promise to release some revenue to humanitarian organisations is meaningless, as several groups have refused on principle to accept the illegally seized funds. "It is not the role of humanitarian aid agencies to ensure that the basic needs of the civilian populations living in the Occupied Territories are covered," Médecins Sans Frontières declared in a statement issued in April. "This responsibility, in accordance with the fourth Geneva Convention, is that of the occupying power, namely the State of Israel."

By contrast, the Bush administration and the other major powers have all defended Israel's war crimes. Washington has openly endorsed Israel's offensive, and the European powers and the Arab countries have participated in the devastating US-Israeli financial embargo of the Palestinian Authority. Egypt and the European Union are directly involved in the siege of Gaza, with officials helping to enforce Israel's restrictions on movement over the Gaza-Egypt border.

The ceasefire in Lebanon has not resulted in any increased international scrutiny or condemnation of Israel's attacks in Gaza, as many Palestinians had desperately hoped. The "forgotten war" has continued unabated. According to Palestinian figures, 250 people, including at least 44 children, have been killed during the offensive, while Israeli bulldozers and missile strikes have destroyed scores of homes, businesses, farmlands, and other infrastructure.

A review of IDF attacks in the past three days provides a snapshot of Israel's daily operations. Yesterday four members of a Hamas-linked PA security force were killed when a missile struck a street in Gaza City. On Sunday, a 64-year-old man was shot dead in the West Bank city of Jenin. The IDF said they shot the man after they saw a figure on a rooftop holding what looked like a weapon. The man was actually carrying a flashlight.

A number of operations were conducted on Saturday. Two Hamas militants were assassinated in Gaza City in separate tank and fighter jet attacks. The IDF also

bombed a Reuters vehicle, injuring two journalists as well as a nearby woman and child. The car was clearly marked on all sides, including the roof, as a media vehicle. Also on Saturday, a Palestinian fisherman attempting to defy the Israeli sea blockade was severely wounded when an Israeli gunboat fired at him. In the West Bank, Israeli soldiers launched a raid in Nablus, and after two alleged militants refused to surrender, bulldozers destroyed a four-storey building that housed about 100 people. When local youth threw stones at the soldiers, IDF forces shot into the crowd, wounding 20 people and killing a 16-year-old boy.

The raid in Nablus was only one of a series of IDF operations in the West Bank in recent weeks. While Gaza has been the focus of Israel's offensive, militants are also being arrested and assassinated in the West Bank. The Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem has noted that the IDF's network of checkpoints and barriers in the West Bank has been expanded and made even more restrictive in the past two months. In a recent study, the group found a "substantial increase in cases in which Israeli soldiers and Border Police in the West Bank beat, abuse, and humiliate Palestinians".

None of Israel's operations have anything to do with recovering Corporal Galid Shalit, the Israeli soldier captured near Gaza by Palestinian militants on June 25, or preventing Palestinian rocket attacks. The Olmert government has repeatedly responded to Hamas offers of a prisoner swap and a permanent ceasefire with provocative military attacks aimed at precluding any negotiated peace.

Just as in Lebanon, the Olmert government seized upon the capture of IDF personnel and the "terrorist" threat as a pretext for a long-planned offensive. While the nature of Israel's offensive bears no relation to the war's stated rationale, the IDF's military campaign in the Occupied Territories is commensurate with the Olmert government's real strategy of completely destroying the economic, social and political foundations of Palestinian society.

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