

Ground assault sparks worldwide protests

Civilian casualties mount as Israeli army slices through Gaza

By Chris Marsden
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Israel is engaged in direct conflict with Hamas fighters in the Gaza Strip, after its long-expected ground invasion began Saturday. Verifiable accounts of the fighting are scarce, because Israel continues to refuse access to foreign journalists even after its Supreme Court issued a ruling that allowed a "limited number" into Gaza.

The attack began on Saturday night when Israeli military convoys supported by attack helicopters crossed into northern Gaza at four points. Thousands of soldiers in three brigade-size formations then pushed into Gaza. Since then, Israeli tanks have been reported around Gaza City and the northern towns of Beit Lahiya and the Jabaliya refugee camp.

The territory has been cut in three, with the northern town of Beit Hanoun surrounded and clashes also reported in Rafah, on the southern border with Egypt. Gaza city, with a population of 400,000, is surrounded after an armoured force took over the abandoned Jewish settlement of Netzarim. This gives Israel control of the main north-south road.

At least 63 Palestinians have been reported killed by Israeli tank shells or missiles since the start of the ground offensive Saturday. The real death toll, however, may be far higher, as emergency medical personnel are not able to reach the areas where fighting is taking place.

The total official death toll since Israel began bombarding Gaza and its 1.5 million people has risen to at least 512, with 87 of those killed children.

An Israeli bombardment of Gaza overnight targeted 40 sites and resulted in more than 20 deaths and many more injuries. Palestinian medics reported that just 3 of the 23 Palestinians killed were Hamas fighters and the rest civilians. Earlier on Saturday, at least 13 people were killed when a missile struck a crowded mosque in Beit Lahiya. Israeli forces also attacked the American school in Gaza, killing a guard. An Israeli spokeswoman declared blithely, "The school...was a site for launching rockets."

A tank shell fired in northern Gaza Sunday reportedly killed 12 people, mostly civilians. And a school in Beit Lahiya and a shopping centre in Gaza City were shelled, killing 5 people and seriously injuring dozens more.

Among those killed in the Israeli ground assault Sunday was a mother and her four children, whose home in the At-Toufah neighborhood of Gaza City was targeted by tank fire, Palestinian medical personnel in Gaza reported. One of the children was only a year old, while another was two.

Also killed in the Israeli attack were three ambulance workers who were struck by a missile as they were aiding wounded civilians.

The ground assault has dramatically intensified the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, cutting off electricity, while food stocks are dwindling fast. Meanwhile, the Egyptian government has closed off its Rafah border crossing to Gaza, preventing aid columns from getting in and the

wounded from getting out. The crossing was a lifeline for those seeking medical treatment for wounds suffered in the attacks, as Gaza's own hospitals have become so overwhelmed that they are near breakdown. Medical personnel report running short of critical medicine, while power is maintained only by means of aging generators.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) Sunday rebutted the cynical claims by Israeli officials that they are determined to prevent a humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip.

"Bread and wheat are going to run out extremely rapidly, and people are going to start getting extremely hungry," said UNRWA spokesman Chris Gunness. "Medical supplies are in critically short supply. When you have a situation where houses are being blown up and women and children are being maimed, I would say that's a humanitarian crisis."

Meanwhile, the Israeli army has given its forces carte-blanche for killing civilians, declaring Saturday, "Anyone who hides a terrorist or weapons in his house is considered a terrorist."

This is only the beginning. There are still around 10,000 Israeli troops and hundreds of tanks massed on the Gaza border, and the government made an urgent call-up of "tens of thousands" more military reservists. Defence officials said this could enable a broader ground offensive in the operation's third phase.

This is likely to target Hezbollah guerrillas in Lebanon. Israeli warplanes have engaged in continuous incursions into Lebanese airspace over the past week. Two weeks after the last major Israeli offensive against Gaza, in June 2006, a cross border raid by Hezbollah became a *casus belli* for a brutal month-long assault that killed more than 1,200 Lebanese, mostly civilians. Israel's Defence Minister Ehud Barak said on Saturday, "While we are fighting in Gaza, we will keep an open eye on the sensitive situation on our northern border...we are ready and alert to face any unwarranted development in that area."

In contrast to the Palestinian death toll, the Israeli army said one of its soldiers had been killed by a mortar shell and 30 soldiers have been wounded in the ground offensive, two of them seriously. Rockets fired at southern Israel have left four dead in total.

The ground invasion was green-lighted by US President Bush, who on Friday took the extraordinary decision to release the transcript of his Saturday radio broadcast in which he declared that a ceasefire was only possible if it prevented Hamas from re-arming. "Another one-way ceasefire that leads to rocket attacks on Israel is not acceptable," he said.

The US blocked a cease-fire motion at an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council Saturday night.

Global wave of protest

Israel's bombardment and ground invasion of Gaza have unleashed a global wave of protest.

The most important and sizeable protest took place in Sakhnin, a Palestinian town within Israeli boundaries. The 1.4-million-strong Arab community makes up about 20 percent of Israel's population and has organised several protests in recent days. But the protest organised by the Higher Arab Monitoring Committee was one of the largest held by Israeli Arabs since October 2000. Organisers estimated that at least 100,000 people took part in protest, which stretched throughout the Sakhnin.

Crowds waving Palestinian flags and brandishing pro-Palestinian placards chanted, "Gaza will not surrender to the tanks and bulldozers!" and "Don't fear, Gaza, we are with you!" Some protesters called Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak a "coward" and accused him of "collaborating with the Americans."

Thousands of police were deployed on the outskirts of the town and across northern Israel.

Palestinian members of the Israeli Knesset were present from several parties. Hadash Chairman Mohammad Barakeh MK said, "There are three clear objectives: the first is solidarity with the people in the Strip who are suffering from seven days of major Israeli attacks.

"The second objective is to the Israeli government urging it to stop the unjust aggression.... We are also saying to the Palestinian people, to all of us, it is time for reconciliation. There is no place for division when facing this level of attack."

Following a minute's silence, Sakhnin Mayor Mazem Ghanaim called for an immediate halt to the Gaza offensive. "The Israeli occupation force is conducting crimes in Gaza before the eyes of the international community," he said. "This is the biggest procession in the history of the Palestinian people in Israel. The level of crowdedness in Gaza is one of the highest in the world, and yet the Israel Air Force jets are bombing and murdering innocent people. I call on Israel to end the war immediately and lift the siege."

Wassil Taha MK (Balad) said, "This is one of the greatest demonstrations we have seen because it affects each and every family. People seek to express their pain by showing solidarity with the members of our nation."

Ibrahim Zabidat, who led the rally, said, "The Israeli killing machine must stop. I call from here to the people in Gaza and say: Don't be afraid, don't give up, block them with your blood in order to build the state of Palestine, whose capital is Jerusalem."

The chairman of the Balad Party, MK Jamal Zahalka, said there is a need to "try Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Defence Minister Ehud Barak, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and IDF Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi in an international war crimes tribunal for their role in the killing of civilians in the Gaza Strip."

There was also a large protest by Palestinians in the West Bank city of Hebron.

Thousands demonstrated in Tel Aviv on Saturday, with police forces struggling to separate anti-war protesters from right-wing counter demonstrations.

Peace protesters in Rabin Square waved Palestinian flags and shouted, "Barak, Barak, Defence Minister, how many children have you murdered today?" "Stop the bombing, stop the killing."

Hundreds of thousands also protested across Europe.

In Paris, police admit to 21,000 demonstrators marching through the city's luxury shopping district shouting, "We are all Palestinians" and "Israel assassin." The protest was prevented from reaching the Israeli embassy.

CRS riot police clashed with 400-500 youths wearing Palestinian flags and kaffiyehs in the evening. Protesters reportedly set cars on fire, and several luxury store windows, such as the Louis Pion watch store, were smashed and looted.

Massive pro-Palestinian protests took place simultaneously in other major French cities.

In London, tens of thousands of demonstrators marched. (See "Video: London demonstrators protest Israeli assault on Gaza") Many of them threw shoes in front of the Downing Street residence of British Prime Minister Gordon Brown as they made their way along Whitehall in homage to the Iraqi journalist who threw his shoe at President George W. Bush during a press conference last month.

Several people were injured when riot police began hitting and kicking protesters in an underpass in Piccadilly. In the evening, police officers penned in several thousand demonstrators who were protesting outside the Israeli embassy and began hitting them with shields and batons, leaving even more wounded. (YouTube video)

Organisers made an official complaint to the Metropolitan Police, saying officers provoked the crowd by charging at them.

In the afternoon, speakers at Trafalgar Square drew attention to the terrible plight of the Palestinian people, but the perspective promoted by the march organisers—the Stop the War Coalition, Palestine Solidarity Campaign and Muslim organisations—was largely one of putting pressure on governments or the United Nations to intervene.

Former Labour MP Tony Benn condemned the Bush government for its full support of Israeli aggression and the way the US uses Israel to control the Middle East. He said it was necessary to "mobilise world opinion" for a free Palestine and an end to Western domination.

Respect MP George Galloway likened the Palestinian people to those in the Nazi ghettos saying, "those who are murdering them are the equivalent of those who murdered the Jews in Warsaw in 1942." He singled out the Egyptian regime for special mention as jointly responsible for the situation in Gaza and declared its President Hosni Mubarak an international criminal. He called on the "great people of Egypt, the heroic armed forces of Egypt...to rise up and sweep away this tyrant."

Former London Mayor Ken Livingstone criticised the Israeli government for using the invasion as a means of gaining votes in the upcoming elections. He appealed to the British government to intervene, saying, "I heard Gordon Brown denounce apartheid [in South Africa] year after year, I want him to denounce the attacks on the Palestinian people."

The singer Annie Lennox, warned of an Israeli ground invasion within hours, adding, "We call on ministers of all nations to take responsibility, speak out and demand an immediate ceasefire now"

Comedian Alexei Sayle said that "Israel purports to speak in our name, purports to somehow give us a home or provide protection" but said that the Israeli government "does not act in my name." He criticised the way the way the government condemns any criticism of Israel as anti-semitism. "I want to be proud of my people. If only Jewish people could turn away from violence, what an amazing thing that would be."

Human rights activist Bianca Jagger called on Barack Obama to "express an opinion on what is happening and demand an immediate halt to the shelling against the civilian population in the Gaza Strip." She called on the international community to "ensure the immediate cessation by Israel of the use of excessive and unlawful and disproportionate force."

Smaller rallies were held in other British cities, including Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow.

In Germany, 7,000 people gathered in freezing temperatures in Berlin for a march along Unter den Linden boulevard. More than 4,000 people demonstrated in Duesseldorf, and some 5,000 in Frankfurt. Protesters carried banners declaring, "Germany, look! Where is your sense of justice?"

In Austria, 2,500 people demonstrated in Salzburg. In Spain, there was a protest outside the Foreign Ministry in Madrid.

In the Turkish capital of Ankara, 5,000 demonstrators shouted "Killer Israel!" at a rally in the city centre. Demonstrations were also held Sunday.

In Athens, Greece, 5,000 protested, and there were clashes with police

outside the Israeli embassy. In Cyprus, about 2,000 people demonstrated, and some pelted riot police with rocks, sticks, shoes and oranges near the Israeli embassy in Nicosia.

In the Netherlands, thousands marched through Amsterdam. One banner read, "Anne Frank is turning in her grave."

Hundreds more marched in the Swedish cities of Malmö and Uppsala, while in Oslo, Norway, demonstrators marched from the parliament to the Israeli Embassy.

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