

Gaza death toll tops 700 as Israel prepares new escalation

By Bill Van Auken
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Israeli military forces resumed their assault on Gaza Wednesday following a three-hour truce, which itself was marked by sporadic attacks. According to reports in the Israeli press, the government is discussing a major escalation of the assault on Gaza, even as it claims to welcome efforts by France, Egypt and other countries to broker a ceasefire.

Medical authorities in Gaza Wednesday put the death toll in the 12-day Israeli military siege at over 700, including 219 children and 89 women. The number of wounded, meanwhile, has risen to over 3,100—46 percent of them women and children.

The stated aim of Wednesday's brief suspension of hostilities was to allow Gaza's 1.5 million people to venture out in search of food and other supplies and to allow aid convoys into the territory. Aid officials made clear, however, that the respite was entirely inadequate to distribute food, fuel and other necessities of life to a population that is on the brink of starvation following not only the last 12 days of bombardment, but also the 18 months of Israeli economic blockade that preceded it.

Gazans did use the brief cease-fire, however, to bury their dead and dig out more bodies from the rubble.

Tens of thousands attended a mass funeral in the Jabalya refugee camp in northern Gaza for the civilians massacred there Tuesday, when Israeli forces deliberately shelled the UN-run al-Fakhora school, where they had sought refuge.

The death toll in the attack, the single bloodiest action since the Israeli onslaught began on December 27, rose to 46 Wednesday as four more gravely wounded victims died in Gaza hospitals.

Standing before the bodies of men women, children and elderly people wrapped in white shrouds and the green and yellow flags of Hamas and Fatah, the massive crowd at Wednesday's funeral shouted slogans demanding that Israeli officials be tried as war criminals and calling for revenge.

John Ging, the head of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in the Gaza Strip, dismissed Israeli claims that its forces had shelled the school after coming under mortar fire from the facility. "I can tell you categorically that there was no militant activity in that school at the time of that tragedy," he told the *Al Jazeera* news agency. "They were innocent people," Ging said of 350 Palestinians who sought safety in the school after fleeing the Israeli invaders.

"We are completely devastated. There is nowhere safe in Gaza," Ging added. Approximately 15,000 Palestinians have fled to the 23 UN-run schools in the territory in hopes of finding security. Another school was also bombed Tuesday, killing another three Palestinians.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon condemned these attacks, calling them "totally unacceptable." He said in a statement, "After

earlier strikes, the Israeli government was warned that its operations were endangering UN compounds. I am deeply dismayed that despite these repeated efforts, today's tragedies have ensued." The UN called for a formal investigation into the Jabalya massacre.

The Israeli decision to suspend its military operations for three hours and open up what it touted as a "humanitarian corridor" was widely seen as a public relations gesture aimed at diverting public attention from the atrocity carried out the day before. The maneuver proved largely successful in terms of media coverage in the West, where no government appears inclined to hold the Israeli regime responsible for its crimes.

As for the UN, it held a session on Gaza Wednesday in which various foreign ministers spoke out against the Israeli operation, but no action was taken. The US has systematically blocked any resolution demanding an end to the assault on Gaza.

The attack on the Jabalya school recalls a similar atrocity carried out by the Israeli military in its "Operation Grapes of Wrath" attack on southern Lebanon in 1996, when it rained artillery fire on a UN compound in the village of Qana, where some 800 civilians had taken refuge from the fighting. That attack killed 106 people.

The differences, however, are striking. In the wake of the 1996 attack the Israeli government claimed, falsely, that it was an accident and brought its military operations to an end. This time, it has steadfastly defended its criminal action and made it clear that the killing will go on.

And so it did in earnest once the 180-minute truce expired at 4 pm Gaza time. Israeli warplanes and tanks resumed pounding Gaza's densely populated neighborhoods.

Hundreds of families were forced to flee from the Rafah area near Gaza's southern border with Egypt after Israeli planes dropped leaflets announcing that the area would be subjected to intense bombardment.

The stated aim of this attack is to destroy the tunnels that have been dug under the border and which have served as a narrow lifeline for Gaza, bringing in food and fuel supplies that are blocked by Israel's economic blockade. Israel charges that they have also been used to supply Hamas fighters with weapons, including the rockets that have been fired into Israel. In practice, the bombardment is destroying scores of homes, creating a wider no-man's-land on the border.

Among those killed Wednesday was a father and three of his children, who died in an air strike on their car.

Medical workers at the Kamal Udwan Hospital reported that three sisters were killed in an Israeli bombardment on the eastern edge of the sprawling Jabalya refugee camp carried out during the supposed three-hour suspension of attacks.

Four other people were killed and seven wounded in an attack on a

Mosque in the Sheik Radwan neighborhood of Gaza City, and two died in an aerial bombardment of the Zeitoun district.

The Palestine Red Crescent reported Wednesday that Israeli forces had shelled five of its ambulances, killing six people.

The Israeli Army released footage Wednesday showing its troops rounding up Gazan men in civilian clothes, taking them away in handcuffs and blindfolds.

Meanwhile, Gaza's humanitarian crisis is becoming ever more catastrophic. Aid workers said that instead of a three-hour ceasefire, they would need an end to bombardments lasting a month to be able to adequately resume food distributions to the 750,000 Gazans who are totally dependent upon UN aid for survival.

Three quarters of the territory's population remain without electricity or water, and fuel for heating homes has run out in what is Gaza's coldest month. Families are forced to keep their windows open to prevent them from being shattered by explosions.

The World Bank issued a report Wednesday warning that Gaza confronts a severe public health crisis as a result of the lack of drinking water and the escalating degradation of its sewage system.

The director of Ash-Shifa Hospital, Gaza's largest medical facility, warned Wednesday that it would cease functioning if it failed to receive fuel to power its emergency generators. Deprived of electric power, a failure of the generators, he said, could lead to the deaths of hundreds of patients on kidney dialysis and in intensive care, as well as 25 premature babies. The hospital has already been overwhelmed by the flood of wounded, lacking adequate medicines, anesthetics and other basic necessities.

As with Wednesday's "humanitarian" gesture, the flurry of positive remarks about ongoing diplomatic efforts led by French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to bring about a ceasefire seems aimed at obscuring the fact that the massacre of Gaza's people is continuing.

Sarkozy's office initially reported that Israel and the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority had accepted the Franco-Egyptian peace proposal. It was forced to retract this assertion, however, acknowledging that Israel had merely reacted "positively" to the plan.

A senior Israeli official told the Reuters news agency, "There is agreement on the principles but translating those principles into practical action is a challenge that is still ahead of us."

Specifically rejected was Egypt's call for a 48-hour ceasefire to facilitate the negotiation of an end to the fighting. Israel intends to use the talks on a ceasefire agreement as a cover for continuing and even intensifying its military operations.

The Egyptian and French proposal, which is apparently being negotiated over the head of Hamas, essentially calls for a tightening of the noose that Israel has placed around Gaza by more effectively sealing off the Egypt-Gaza border, potentially through the deployment of an international force there.

Palestinian legislator and former negotiator Hanan Ashrawi in an interview with the BBC on the discussions surrounding the proposal said, "Israel is still buying time to create facts on the ground."

Indeed, as the *Jerusalem Post* noted, "Just hours after Jerusalem signaled it might give Franco-Egyptian diplomacy a chance on Wednesday, the Security Cabinet gave the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) the green light to continue Operation Cast Lead in Gaza." Plans for the third and bloodiest phase of the operation, which would send Israeli troops into the south of the Gaza Strip as well as into the heart of Gaza City's crowded neighborhoods may well be implemented under the cover of this supposed renewal of diplomacy.

According to a report on Wednesday's cabinet meeting by DEBKAFfile, an Internet site with close connections to Israeli military-intelligence sources, "A growing number of cabinet ministers advocated expanding the military operation against Hamas and bringing it to the point of resolution, supporting the view held by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and the military high command."

In Washington, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice responded to the French-Egyptian initiative by repeating what has been the administration's mantra since the outset of the Israeli blitz against Gaza: "It has to be a ceasefire that will not allow a return to the status quo," she said. This position translates into US support for Israel continuing its drive to change facts on the ground through the slaughter of innocent civilians.

President-elect Barack Obama found himself compelled to break his 11-day-old silence on the killing spree in Gaza. Apparently reacting to the wave of international revulsion over the massacre at the UN school in Jabalya, Obama made a brief statement declaring that "the loss of civilian life in Gaza and in Israel is a source of deep concern to me, and after January 20th I'll have plenty to say about the issue."

Obama again voiced no disagreement with the Bush administration's policy and certainly no condemnation of Israel's actions.

Leading Democrats in both houses in Congress, having officially begun their new session on Tuesday, are working furiously to prepare a non-binding resolution supporting Israel's action and essentially backing the position of the Bush administration.

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (Democrat from Maryland) told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that such a resolution is "in the works."

"Certainly it would not demand a ceasefire," Hoyer said. "It would speak to the conditions that would justify a cease-fire. A cease-fire is not a just cease-fire when it's just Israel," he added.

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