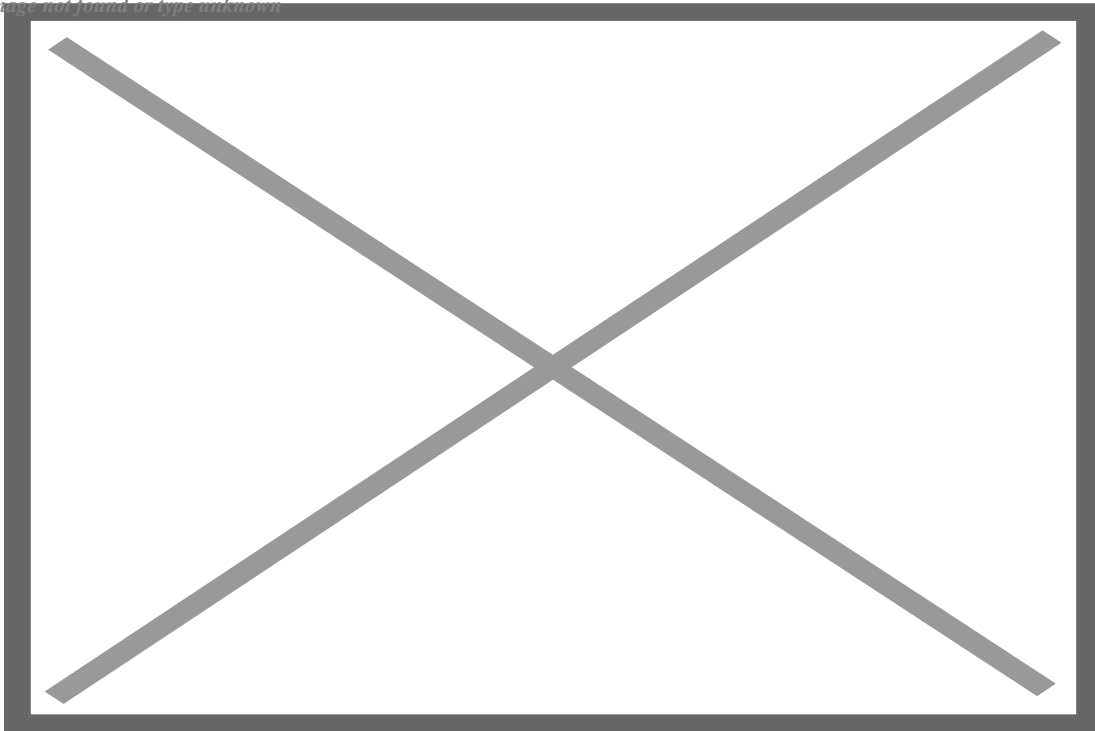


Dozens killed while fleeing Gaza homes as Israel conducts ground raids

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Riding in a damaged vehicle a Palestinian family flees with hundreds of other following the Israeli army's warning to leave their homes and move south before an expected ground offensive, in Gaza City on October 13, 2023. [Mahmud Hams/AFP]

Gaza City, October 13 (RHC)-- Dozens of Palestinians have been killed in Israeli air raids while trying to flee the northern Gaza Strip, according to Hamas officials, after the Israeli military ordered more than one million residents to evacuate in a demand rejected by the United Nations as "impossible".

The media office of Hamas, the Palestinian group that governs the besieged Gaza Strip, said 70 people, mostly women and children, were killed in the air raids on cars leaving Gaza City. It said the vehicles were targeted in three places.

Thousands of Palestinian civilians began to flee to southern Gaza on Friday under a relentless barrage of air strikes after the Israeli military order although there were few signs of a mass exodus. Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said any Palestinian who wants to “save their lives” must heed the order to move south as Israel prepares for an expected ground assault on the besieged coastal enclave.

About 1.1 million of Gaza’s 2.3 million people live in the northern part of the strip, which includes Gaza City, the most populated urban area. Several rights groups have denounced the order and warned that a potential forced transfer of the civilian population would be a violation of international law.

Many Palestinians said they would not heed the order. “The feeling is that there is no hope, that no one cares about Gaza or what’s happening to the people,” Gaza resident Mansour Shouman told Al Jazeera on Friday.

“If we’re going to die here, we’re going to die in our homes. We’re going to die in the north or the south. We’re going to die with our heads up high, standing on our lands, standing with our rights and holding strong to our faith.”

The Gaza Ministry of Health said on Friday that at least 1,800 people — more than half of them women or people under the age of 18 — have been killed as Israel pounds the strip with air strikes that have levelled entire neighbourhoods.

Hamas has told people to stay put, and many of the enclave’s residents already believe there is nowhere safe they can go. “The noose around the civilian population in Gaza is tightening. How are 1.1 million people supposed to move across a densely populated war zone in less than 24 hours?” UN aid chief Martin Griffiths wrote on social media.

“Despite the occupation’s threats to shell; the decision has been made. We have not left and will not leave,” the medical organisation Palestinian Red Crescent said in a social media post. “Our medics will carry on their humanitarian duties. We won’t leave people to face death alone.”

An Israeli military spokesman said Israeli soldiers and tanks on Friday conducted their first ground raids into Gaza since Hamas fighters carried out a devastating attack on southern Israel on Saturday, killing at least 1,300 people and injuring more than 3,000.

More than 100 people, including Israelis and foreigners, are also being held captive by Hamas.

Israeli authorities say the soldiers in the initial raids targeted Palestinian rocket crews and tried to gain information about the captives. The small-scale operations are a likely prelude to an anticipated ground invasion.

A combination of Israeli air raids and an Israeli siege that has cut off access to water, electricity, food and fuel has devastated health facilities in the beleaguered strip, where medical workers now say they face impossible choices under the evacuation orders.

The international medical group Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), also known as Doctors Without Borders, issued a statement on Friday saying Israeli authorities had given it just two hours to evacuate a hospital in northern Gaza.

“Our staff are still treating patients. We unequivocally condemn this action, the continued indiscriminate bloodshed and attacks on health care in Gaza. We are trying to protect our staff and patients,” the group said in a social media post.

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