

Israel's ground assault in Gaza faces strong resistance



Gaza City, November 5 (RHC)-- A week after it sent ground forces into Gaza, Israel said its military had surrounded Gaza City in the north of the territory, killed 10 Hamas commanders who helped plan the October 7th attacks on Israel, and scored "impressive successes" according to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Israeli forces appeared to be in the process of cutting the Gaza Strip in two, south of Gaza City. By Friday, they had advanced about 15 km (9.3 miles) from the Gaza-Israel border along the coastal road, adjacent to the Turkey-Palestine Friendship Hospital, well south of Gaza City. The hospital is Gaza's only cancer treatment facility and has been forced shut down because of fuel shortages resulting from Israel's siege on the enclave.

Meanwhile, Hamas said it was fighting Israeli armour east of that point, at Juhor ad-Dik, suggesting that Israeli forces were operating almost across the breadth of the Gaza strip, from the coast to the border.

Battles continued to the rear of this advanced position. Hamas-affiliated sources said fighting was ongoing at Beit Hanoun, in the northeastern corner of the Gaza strip.

The Israeli strategy this past week seemed to be one of isolating and wearing down Hamas and its affiliates in the northern third of the Gaza Strip. But it has come at an increasing humanitarian cost to Gaza and a reputational price for Israel.

Israel claimed the Jabalia refugee camp north of Gaza City was a hub of Hamas's tunnel network used for weapons stockpiles, rocket firing positions, and tunnels leading to the coast. Israel, without providing clear evidence to back its claims, flattened large parts of Jabalia in air raids over three days. At least 50 Palestinians were killed in the bombing of Jabalia.

Since the Hamas attack on southern Israel on October 7 that killed more than 1,400 people, Israel's aerial bombardment of Gaza, now accompanied by the ground assault, has killed more than 9,400 Palestinians, including nearly 4,000 children.

On Friday, an ambulance convoy headed from Gaza City to the south of Gaza was bombed — again, Israel claimed, without providing evidence, that Hamas fighters were in the ambulances. At least 15 people were killed.

Still, Israel has not eliminated Hamas's ability to launch rockets targeting military installations in Israel at a rate of about a dozen a day throughout the week, though this slowed to nine rocket attacks on November 3rd. Official figures released by the Israeli government and the health ministry in Gaza suggest most of the fatalities on both sides have been civilian.

Israel said 25 of its soldiers had been killed since the ground invasion began, bringing total military deaths to 332. Another 260 soldiers have been injured. Israel has said Hamas is also holding 242 civilians hostage.

On October 25, Netanyahu declared that Israel's aim in the coming days would be "to eliminate Hamas by destroying its military and governance capabilities and to do everything possible to get our hostages back."

The Israeli military tested Hamas's reflexes with a limited incursion into northern Gaza the following night with a single armoured company using bulldozers. According to claims by the Israeli military, the company "located and attacked many terrorists, destroyed terrorist infrastructures, anti-tank positions."

Israeli forces conducted several more ground incursions into Gaza on the night of October 27, this time supported by helicopter gunships. Israeli naval forces also "destroyed terrorist infrastructures... and operated in a compound used by [Hamas'] naval commando forces," on the beach at Rafah, in southern

Gaza, the Israeli army said.

Then, on October 28, Israel launched its ground invasion, exactly three weeks after the Hamas attack on southern Israel. The invasion was accompanied by a telecommunications blackout, cutting internet and telephone access to, from and within the Gaza Strip.

Experts have told Al Jazeera that both the Hamas attack and the Israeli response mark a departure from past confrontations between them in scale and complexity. "What we have seen since October 7 is a new kind of hybrid warfare," said Matteo Bressan, strategic studies professor at Lumsa Master School–University.

"Hamas was able to launch 6,000 rockets into Israel and that number shows a military capability Hamas never had in the past," Bressan said. "The question is how it has been possible that Hamas has conducted 20 attacks in 20 different villages. This means Hamas had clear training and preparation to do that,"

The Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of Hamas, said they targeted rockets at the Israeli nuclear reactor and research facility at Dimona – the first time they have ever done so. "That's why Israel's response is different from the past ... it is not simple, it is not easy, and it will take time for Israel," Bressan said.

"Hamas has been preparing for this campaign for quite a while and predeployed many of the rockets being fired," US special forces commander Demetries Andrew Grimes told Al Jazeera. "Many of the Hamas rocket batteries are buried underground or deployed via the tunnel networks below Gaza." He described the Israeli goal of destroying Hamas as an "extremely challenging endeavour."

Hamas has said it has destroyed several Israeli tanks and armoured vehicles. For instance, on November 1, Hamas claimed it had destroyed at least four Israeli Merkava tanks using Yasin-105 anti-tank weapons during clashes in Beit Hanoun. Those claims had not been independently verified.

Hamas had also been daring in its tactics. On October 29, for instance, the Qassam Brigades, Hamas's military wing, said they used tunnels to land fighters behind Israelis manning the Beit Hanoun crossing, called Erez by Israel, between Israel and northern Gaza.

"The resistance fighters penetrated the border and fired anti-armour missiles at Israeli vehicles and killed a number of occupation soldiers," they said. Grimes considered Israel's military fatalities "a high casualty count considering they are only a few weeks into the campaign."

The daring and effectiveness of the Qassam Brigades prompted the chief of Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed group in Lebanon, to declare Israel weak. "It has exposed the frailty, weakness and total fragility of Israel, more frail than a spider's web," said Hassan Nasrallah in a televised address on November 3.

"The swift response by the US to support and back Israel has revealed how failing Israel is since the Al-Aqsa Flood operation," he said, using the operational name of the October 7 attacks.

Nasrallah said this war would mark a new era. "It is not an event like those of the past. It is a decisive battle, a historic one. What happens after this battle is never like before," he said.

Throughout the week there were signs that Israel had felt stung by international criticism of its prosecution of the war and was trying to improve its image.

Netanyahu initially resisted pressure from the European Union and United Nations for a ceasefire for humanitarian reasons, saying Hamas could use it to regroup. That position softened a little by November 3, a day after US President Joe Biden supported calls for a humanitarian pause in the fighting. Now, Israel has conditioned any pause in fighting on the release of Hamas-held captives. "Israel refuses a temporary ceasefire which does not include the release of our hostages," Netanyahu said in a televised

statement.

Netanyahu also modified his position on the amount of aid reaching Gaza. He initially allowed only a handful of trucks into the territory bringing food, water and medicine. By October 31, he agreed to allow 100 trucks a day, but even that, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, was not enough.

On Thursday, Israel for the first time allowed Palestinians with foreign or dual nationality to leave for Egypt via the Rafah crossing at the southern end of Gaza, along with about 80 wounded Palestinians.

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