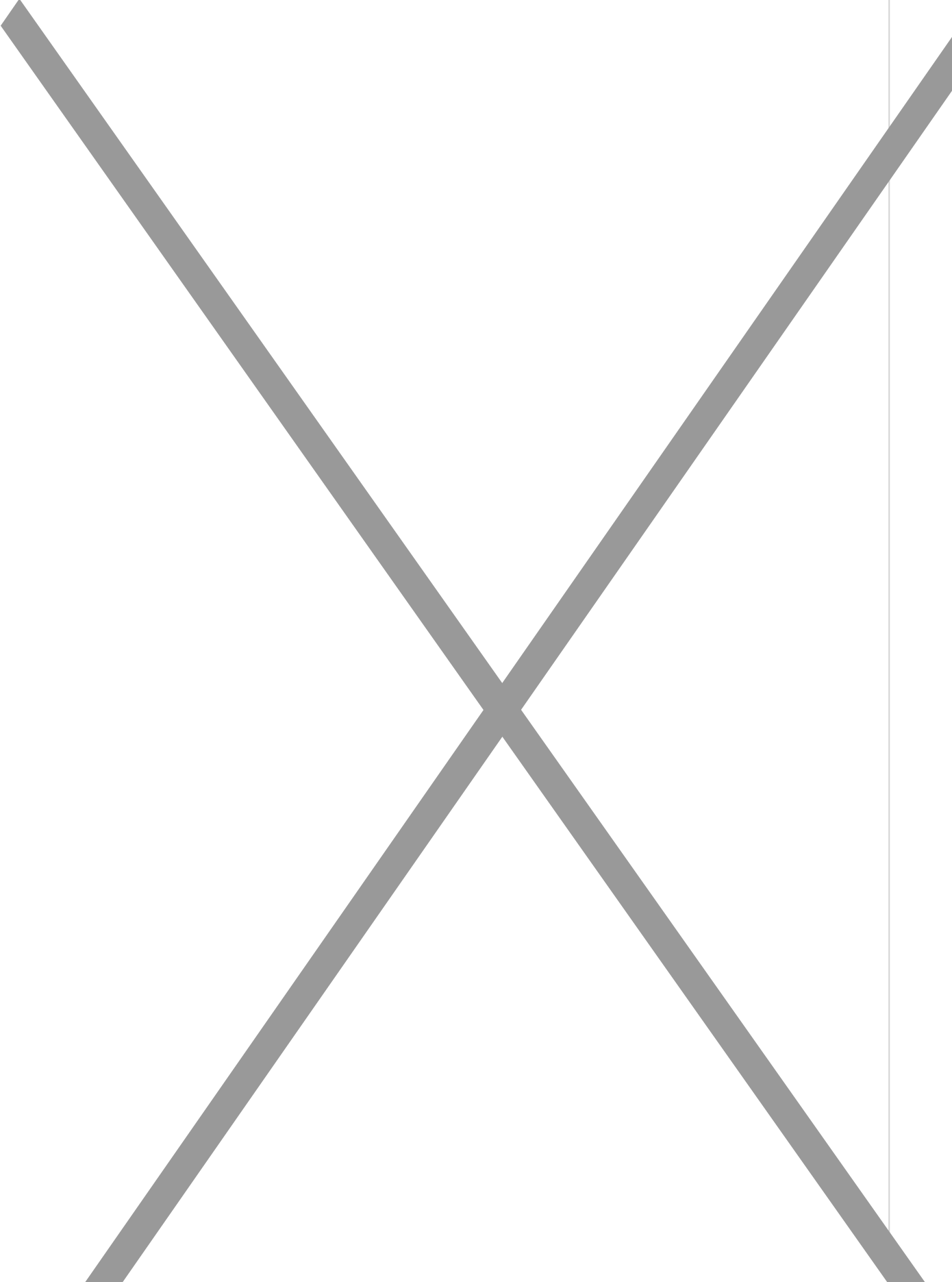


*Israeli prime minister vows to  
invade Gaza's Rafah despite  
international pressure*

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Tel Aviv, March 18 (RHC)-- Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has reiterated that Israel would push on with its ground offensive in the southern Gaza city of Rafah despite growing international pressure.

Netanyahu vowed on Sunday to send ground forces into Rafah, where about 1.4 million displaced Palestinians have sought shelter. "No amount of international pressure will stop us from realizing all the goals of the war: eliminating Hamas, releasing all our captives and ensuring that Gaza will no longer pose a threat against Israel," Netanyahu said during a cabinet meeting. "To do this, we will also operate in Rafah," he said.

Israel approved plans to assault Rafah despite increasing international calls to halt the military operations. Israel's allies and critics warned Netanyahu against the invasion of Rafah fearing mass civilian casualties.

U.S. President Joe Biden, who has supported Israel during the war, has said an Israeli invasion of Rafah would be a "red line" without credible civilian protection plans in place. Biden, however, refused to say what would happen if and when Israel crosses that "red line."

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said that the large number of civilian casualties that could result from an Israeli assault on Rafah would make regional peace "very difficult." "[A long-lasting ceasefire] would enable us to prevent such a ground offensive from taking place," he said after talks with Jordan's King Abdullah on Sunday.

Dutch foreign minister Hanke Slot said: "The Netherlands firmly repeats its call to Israel to refrain from such an offensive, which would result in an even bigger humanitarian catastrophe," adding in a post on X that "an immediate humanitarian ceasefire is of the highest importance, resulting in a sustained cessation of hostilities."

The UN agencies already warned Israel last month that a ground invasion of Rafah "could lead to a slaughter in Gaza." "They could also leave an already fragile humanitarian operation at death's door," UN aid chief Martin Griffiths said.

Meanwhile, the head of the World Health Organization (WHO) has called on Israel not to launch a ground offensive on the southern Gaza city of Rafah.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the escalation of violence in Rafah would lead to many more deaths and suffering. He called on Israel to refrain from the attack in the name of humanity. Tedros added that people in Rafah are too fragile, hungry and sick to be moved around.

Over five months into Israel's genocidal war on the Gaza Strip, the regime continues pounding the blockaded territory with indiscriminate airstrikes and artillery fire.

The UN says at least five people were killed and 22 others wounded after Israel targeted a food distribution center in Rafah. The Health Ministry in Gaza says at least 92 people have been killed and 130 others wounded over the past day.

The suffering in Gaza is not limited to just being targeted by bombs. According to UNRWA, malnutrition and famine are striking northern Gaza and are now moving to southern areas.

Since the onset of the Israeli war in early October, at least 31,645 Palestinians have been killed, most of them women and children.

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