

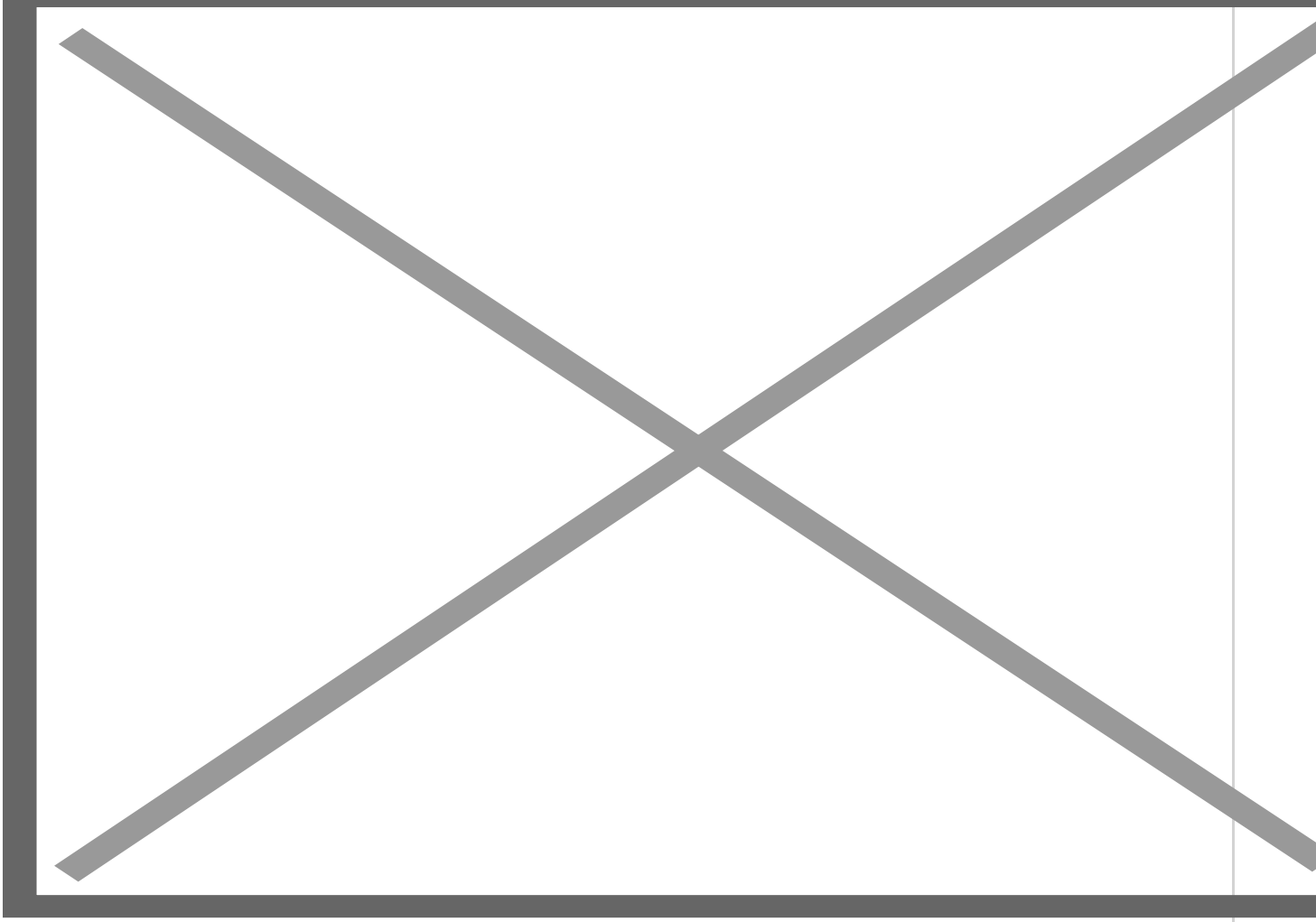
Israel orders Rafah evacuation as Tel Aviv appears ready to launch its threatened assault

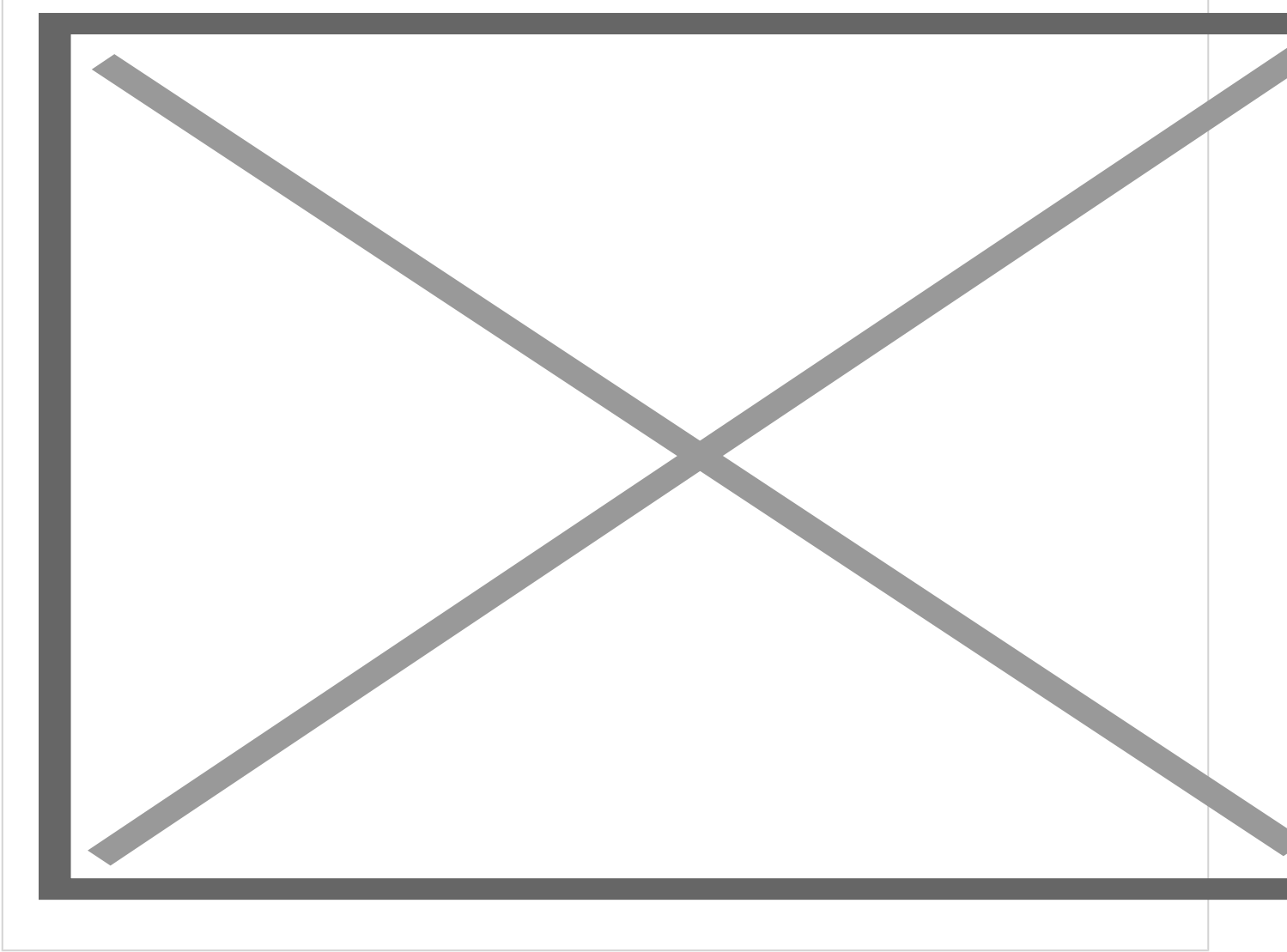
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Palestinian civilians in the southern Gazan city of Rafah voiced despair on Monday as Israel dropped fliers urging them to evacuate for their own "safety."

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Rafah, May 6 (RHC)-- The Israeli army appears set to launch its long-threatened assault on Rafah as it instructs Palestinians to leave parts of the city in southern Gaza.

Israeli forces called on Monday for people in Rafah, into which huge numbers of displaced Palestinians were previously pushed, to evacuate to “an expanded humanitarian area”. The move came as Israel and Hamas blamed one another for a breakdown in truce negotiations.

The Israeli military said in social media posts that it “encourages” residents in eastern Rafah to move to an area in al-Mawasi refugee camp, located by the Mediterranean west of Khan Younis. The Zionist army said calls to “temporarily” relocate would be “conveyed through flyers, SMS messages, phone calls and media broadcasts in Arabic.”

“[Israeli forces] will continue pursuing Hamas everywhere in Gaza until all the hostages that they are holding in captivity are back home,” it said.

In a post on X, Israeli army spokesperson Avichay Adraee specified the appeal was to all people in the ash-Shoka area in the neighbourhoods of as-Salam, Janina, Tabet Ziraa and al-Byouk.

An Israeli military spokesperson told journalists about 100,000 people were being evacuated.

A Hamas official, Sami Abu Zuhri, told Reuters that Israel’s evacuation order and expected offensive is a “dangerous escalation that will have consequences.”

Despite urgent warnings of a humanitarian disaster from his country's allies, including the United States, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has insisted for weeks that an assault on Rafah must happen.

Israel says the city is a refuge for Hamas command and fighters who must be exterminated as part of Netanyahu's pledge to deliver "total victory" over the Palestinian group.

However, NGOs on the ground warn that there is no refuge for the huge numbers of people in Rafah.

Displaced people were previously pushed into the city by Israeli attacks on other areas of Gaza, and the city's population is estimated to have swollen to around 1.4 million. Where those people might find safety from a military offensive is unclear.

The UN Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) warned in a social media post that an Israeli offensive would inflict more suffering and death on a Palestinian population that the health authorities say has killed more than 34,000 since October.

The evacuation order followed a night of intense Israeli bombardment that killed 22 people, including eight children, in the city.

Al Jazeera's Hani Mahmoud, reporting from Rafah, noted that the order came "in the aftermath of the Hamas attack on the Karem Abu Salem crossing, known in Hebrew as Kerem Shalom, and an intense Israeli response, in which they carried out 11 air raids, targeting areas in the eastern parts of Rafah city.

"It's important to point out that so far all the evacuation zones designated by the Israeli military have not been safe for the displaced families. In fact, these areas have been constantly under attack, whether in western Khan Younis or here in Rafah, where 1.5 million people are sheltering," he said.

Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said in a statement that a military operation in Rafah is required due to Hamas's refusals of mediated proposals for a Gaza truce under which it would free some captives.

A Hamas official said the group's negotiating delegation was headed to Doha for "consultations" after the latest round of talks in Cairo failed to produce an agreement.

CIA director Bill Burns is expected in Qatar on Monday for "emergency" talks on mediation efforts with Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani, a source told the AFP news agency.

Hamas negotiators have maintained their stance that any agreement must include a permanent end to the war inside the enclave, Palestinian officials said.

Israel has refused a full ceasefire, offering instead a "pause" in fighting to allow a prisoner swap. Netanyahu is under increasing pressure to secure the release of about 130 captives remaining in Gaza. However, he is also being pushed by hardline coalition partners to continue the war.

Al Jazeera's Tareq Abu Azzoum, reporting from Rafah, said there had been "a great sense of optimism" in the last couple of days among Palestinians regarding negotiations in Cairo between Hamas and Israel. "But that has dwindled following media reports about the same sticking points between Hamas and Israel," he said.

In related news, from Europe, Belgium's Deputy Prime Minister Petra De Sutter warned that an invasion of Rafah would lead to a "massacre," and declared that her country is working on new sanctions on Israel.

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