

*Israel claims it is reopening key
Gaza border point while stepping
up Rafah attacks*

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Tel Aviv, May 8 (RHC)-- Israel claims it is reopening the main crossing point for humanitarian aid to enter the Gaza Strip as its military launched new attacks across the Palestinian territory and was building its offensive on southern Rafah despite ongoing talks for a ceasefire.

The Karem Abu Salem crossing, known as Kerem Shalom to Israelis, was taken over by Israeli forces and closed after a Palestinian rocket attack killed four of their soldiers. Despite signalling the opening of the vital frontier in Rafah on the border with Egypt, aid trucks were yet to start entering the enclave on Wednesday.

Israeli tanks took control of the Palestinian side of the Rafah crossing on Tuesday, choking off supplies of crucial aid and preventing the injured from leaving, after launching a military incursion on the city on Monday, ordering 400,000 people to evacuate from the crowded eastern sector or face death.

Dozens of Palestinians have since been killed and wounded. The Kuwaiti Hospital, one of the few health facilities still operational in Rafah, has received the bodies of 35 people and 129 wounded, medical sources told Al Jazeera. Families, many already displaced several times over, are now moving to Deir el-Balah in central Gaza – despite there being no safe place in the enclave.

“You cannot create a safe zone in a war zone,” said Al Jazeera’s Hani Mahmoud, reporting from Deir el-Balah. “Every time people move from one place to another, they are in search of basic needs and ... necessities that are becoming very hard to find right now.”

The attacks on Wednesday were mainly focused on the as-Salam neighbourhood in eastern Rafah. Al-Najjar Hospital, the area’s main treatment centre, had been forced to close after staff evacuated fearing the oncoming incursion.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Qatar, one of the main international mediators along with Egypt and the United States, warned that Israel forcibly displacing civilians from Rafah would constitute a serious violation of international laws and would exacerbate the worsening humanitarian crisis in the Strip.

In a statement, it also called for “urgent international action” to “prevent the invasion of the city and the commitment of a genocide, and to provide full protection for civilians in accordance with international law and international humanitarian law”.

Egyptian media reported on Wednesday that the truce talks had resumed in Cairo with “all sides present.”

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said a full-scale assault on Rafah would be a “human catastrophe”, while the UN’s agency for children, UNICEF, warned that a ground incursion of Rafah would pose catastrophic risks to children.

“Rafah is now a city of children, who have nowhere safe to go in Gaza. If large-scale military operations start, not only will children be at risk from the violence, but also from chaos and panic, and at a time where their physical and mental states are already weakened,” said Catherine Russell, UNICEF’s executive director.

Gaza’s Ministry of Health condemned the seizure of the Rafah crossing by Israel, which now controls all of the enclave’s frontiers.

“The closure of the Rafah border has prevented the entry of trucks carrying medicine, medical equipment and fuel that is necessary for hospitals and has prevented the departure of thousands of wounded people and patients who were waiting to travel,” a spokesperson said.

The ministry said at least 46 patients and wounded people who had been scheduled to leave on Tuesday for medical treatment have been left stranded – patients like Lama Abu Holi, an eight-year-old Palestinian girl. “My legs hurt. I’m supposed to have an operation. Because the border crossing is shut today, I couldn’t travel,” she told Al Jazeera.

The threat of a full-scale assault on Rafah threatens to widen a rift between Israel and its main backer, the United States, which paused a shipment of weapons to Israel last week.

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