

Israeli officials defiant after Biden weapons warning on Rafah assault

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Displaced Palestinians gather their belongings in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on May 9, 2024 [AFP]

Tel Aviv, May 9 (RHC)-- Israeli officials have struck a defiant tone after U.S. President Joe Biden warned that the United States would not provide weapons for a full-scale ground assault on the southern Gaza city of Rafah, where hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians are hemmed in with no safe way to leave.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in televised remarks on Thursday that Israel, which is heavily reliant on US weapons shipments, would “fight with our fingernails” if necessary.

The U.S. has consistently provided Israel with military support throughout the campaign in the Gaza Strip, defying growing international and domestic pressure and sidelining concerns over alleged violations of international law by Israeli forces.

Biden, in an interview with CNN on Wednesday, said the U.S. was still committed to Israel’s defense and would supply Iron Dome rocket interceptors and other defensive arms but, if Israeli forces invade Rafah, “we’re not going to supply the weapons and artillery shells used.”

Earlier on Wednesday, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said the U.S. would “pause” a shipment of heavy bombs.

The statements appeared to suggest a widening rift between the Biden administration and Netanyahu’s government.

“I turn to Israel’s enemies as well as to our best of friends and say: The State of Israel cannot be subdued,” Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said in a statement on Thursday. “We will stand strong, we will achieve our goals – we will hit Hamas, we will hit Hezbollah, and we will achieve security.”

Talks in Cairo aimed at securing a six-week ceasefire to allow for the release of some captives and a surge in aid to civilians in Gaza are continuing, White House national security spokesperson John Kirby said. CIA Director Bill Burns and other delegations to the talks left Egypt on Thursday without an agreement.

Israel has insisted that the war will continue until it achieves its objective of destroying Hamas in Gaza. Israeli forces seized control of the Palestinian side of the Rafah border crossing with Egypt this week and have probed the outskirts of the nearby city of Rafah, where they have also carried out air strikes.

Netanyahu so far has not ordered troops to enter the city, where Israel says four battalions of Hamas fighters are based.

The Biden administration has consistently said an Israeli incursion into Rafah must not move forward until there is a plan to protect civilians sheltering there. Humanitarian groups have said an assault would result in a catastrophe for civilians and there is no safe option.

“That’s a choice that Israel will have to make, and it’s one we hope they don’t,” Kirby said of the offensive in Rafah, noting that the Biden administration believes there are better ways of advancing Israel’s goal of dismantling Hamas.

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