

*Rights organizations demand
Biden halt Israel arms transfers
after ICJ ruling, pointing to
rising Palestinian death toll*

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Washington, May 25 (RHC)-- Rights groups have renewed calls for U.S. President Joe Biden to halt weapons transfers to Israel, after the United Nations' top court ordered the Israeli government to immediately halt its ground offensive in the southern Gaza city of Rafah and allow aid into the area.

The United States has faced months of pressure to suspend military assistance to Israel as the Palestinian death toll in the Gaza Strip rose steadily and a humanitarian crisis deepened across the besieged enclave.

Biden himself has publicly opposed Israel's offensive in Rafah -- where the majority of Gaza's displaced residents had gathered -- and his administration suspended one shipment of weapons to Israel over its concerns.

Yet despite saying in early May that he would withhold more weapons if the country went ahead with a large-scale operation in Rafah, Biden has largely backed away from using such leverage as Israeli leaders rejected Washington's warnings.

On Friday, Sarah Leah Whitson, executive director of Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN), said the International Court of Justice's order "leaves no ambiguity about what should follow: an arms embargo on Israel".

"Continued U.S. arms transfers to Israel would constitute deliberate defiance of the Court's orders and make our government complicit in genocide," she said in a statement. Citing the "immense risk" to Palestinians in Gaza, the ICJ said Israel must "immediately halt its military offensive, and any other action in the Rafah Governorate, which may inflict on the Palestinian group in Gaza conditions of life that could bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part".

Friday's order did not offer a final determination on whether Israel is committing genocide in Gaza, as alleged by South Africa, which brought the case before the international tribunal. Still, the court's provisional ruling "opens up the possibility for relief" for the people of Rafah, said Balkees Jarrah, associate director of the international justice program at Human Rights Watch (HRW).

"But only if governments use their leverage, including through arms embargoes and targeted sanctions, to force Israel to urgently enforce the court's measures," Jarrah said. Rights observers also noted that the ruling creates a foundation for the UN Security Council to take more resolute action against Israel.

The United States -- one of five members on the council with veto power -- has repeatedly shielded Israel from Security Council action since the Gaza war began in early October.

Michael Schaeffer Omer-Man, director of Israel-Palestine research at DAWN, said the ICJ's ruling should push the U.S. to "support any UNSC actions to enforce the Court's order", or risk appearing "again before the entire world as the guarantor of Israeli impunity."

Nihad Awad, national executive director of the Council on American Islamic Relations, also urged Biden to honour the ICJ's ruling "by immediately ending all military assistance to Israel's genocide." "Israel is clearly attempting to make Gaza uninhabitable. It must be stopped from completing this monstrous goal," Awad said in a statement.

Israel continues to enjoy widespread support among senior Biden administration officials, including the US president himself, as well as lawmakers from both major parties. Still, a growing number of legislators in Washington, DC, have demanded a clearer accounting of whether Israel is using American weapons in Gaza in violation of US and international law.

Israel's bombardment of Gaza has killed more than 35,500 Palestinians, most of them women and children, while its siege on the coastal territory has led to dire shortages of humanitarian aid and pushed Palestinians to the brink of starvation.

"The whole world is taking action to stop the genocide of Palestinians, including the International Court of Justice," U.S. Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, a member of Biden's Democratic Party, wrote on X on Friday. "Where is President Biden's 'red line'?" she said.

Earlier this month, the U.S. Department of State released a report that found it was "reasonable to assess" that Israeli forces had used U.S. weapons in violation of international humanitarian law in Gaza.

But the department said that did not necessarily disprove Israel's "overall commitment" to those standards, and the report concluded that the US could continue to send weapons to Israel. The Biden administration did not immediately comment on the ICJ's order on Friday, or on renewed calls to suspend weapons transfers to Israel.

James Bays, Al Jazeera's diplomatic editor, said the court's ruling creates a predicament for the U.S. government, however, since it is in line with Biden's recent positions. "The Biden administration has repeatedly said the Rafah crossing needs to be opened. The Biden administration has repeatedly said it didn't want a Rafah offensive," Bays noted.

"So the court is simply backing up entirely what the U.S. administration has been saying," he said. "It's going to be very, very hard for the Biden administration to say that this is in some way biased."

Prominent Republican lawmakers swiftly condemned the ICJ's order on Friday, however, with some calling on Biden to reject efforts to get Israel to abide by the decision.

"The ICJ is blinded by anti-Israel bias," Steve Scalise, the second-ranking Republican in the House of Representatives, wrote on social media. "Biden must commit to vetoing any UN Security Council resolution that would enforce this outrageous decision."

U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham also said the "ICJ can go to hell." "It is long past time to stand up to these so-called international justice organizations associated with the UN. Their anti-Israel bias is overwhelming," he wrote on X. "This will and should be ignored by Israel."

Graham is among several U.S. lawmakers who have urged the Biden administration to impose sanctions against the International Criminal Court (ICC) after the court's top prosecutor this week requested arrest warrants for senior Israeli leaders over alleged war crimes in Gaza.

Biden called the prosecutor's move "outrageous" while Secretary of State Antony Blinken suggested that the administration would be willing to work with members of Congress on legislation to penalise the international tribunal.

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