

Israel expands West Bank offensive, says troops to remain until next year



Tel Aviv, February 23 (RHC)-- Israel says it is expanding its military offensive across the occupied West Bank and preparing for troops to remain in some refugee camps "for the next year."

Defense Minister Israel Katz on Sunday said the army had "evacuated" three refugee camps in the northern West Bank and had been ordered to remain there "to prevent the return of [Palestinian] residents."

"So far, 40,000 Palestinians have evacuated from the refugee camps of Jenin, Tulkarem and Nur Shams, which are now empty of residents," he said in a statement. "I have instructed [soldiers] to prepare for a prolonged presence in the cleared camps for the next year and to prevent the return of residents and the resurgence of terrorism," he added.

For more than a month, Israeli forces have been raiding Palestinian homes and using bulldozers to destroy critical infrastructure. The assaults have largely focused on Jenin and Tulkarem.

The Israeli army said tanks have been deployed in Jenin for the first time in the West Bank since the end of the second Intifada, or uprising, in 2005.

Nabil Abu Rudeineh, spokesman for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, condemned the decision to deploy tanks in the northern West Bank. "This is a dangerous Israeli escalation that will not lead to stability or calm, and we warn of this dangerous escalation," he said.

Since January 19 when the Israel-Hamas ceasefire came into effect in the Gaza Strip, Jenin and its adjoining refugee camp have been under Israeli siege and at least 27 Palestinians have been killed there.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu instructed the military to carry out an "intensive" operation in the West Bank after explosions on Thursday on empty buses near Tel Aviv in what Netanyahu's office described as an attempted mass attack.

No casualties were reported in the explosions, and no group has claimed responsibility. Meanwhile, the Palestinian news agency Wafa reported that Israeli army and settler attacks also continued on Sunday across the West Bank.

In Nablus, at least eight people were arrested during Israeli raids while two others were taken into custody at Beit Hanina, a neighbourhood in northern East Jerusalem.

Israeli bulldozers also destroyed electrical lines and waterlines in the town of Qabatiya, south of Jenin, Wafa said, adding that Israeli soldiers again set up a military checkpoint at the entrance to al-Issawiya, another neighbourhood of occupied East Jerusalem.

Israel has killed more than 800 Palestinians in the West Bank since the war in Gaza erupted on October 7, 2023.

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