

Protests intensify across U.S. as Gaza death toll surpasses 5,000

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Chicago, October 24 (RHC)-- In the U.S., hundreds of people gathered in downtown Chicago to demand political leaders call for a ceasefire in Gaza. Dozens of Jewish activists were ticketed and forcibly removed by police after blocking rush hour traffic at a major intersection for over two hours.

As the death toll of Israel's brutal siege and intensifying bombardment of the Gaza Strip surpassed 5,000 on Monday, dozens of activists blocked a major intersection in Chicago as mass protests against U.S. support for the Israeli military continue to erupt despite scant mainstream media coverage.

"Only a ceasefire can protect Palestinian and Israeli lives in this perilous moment," said Eli Newell, an organizer with the Jewish peace group IfNotNow in Chicago, who participated in the direct action on Monday. "Collective punishment won't make anyone safe — not Palestinian civilians, not Israeli hostages."

The action was organized by a coalition of Jewish groups, including IfNotNow and Jewish Voice for Peace. About 50 protesters in downtown Chicago blocked rush hour traffic for over two hours on Monday and refused to leave until they were forcibly removed and ticketed by police. Organizers say the activists were flanked by a march of 500 supporters.

From Minneapolis to New Orleans, from San Francisco and Denver to Philadelphia and Skokie, Illinois, thousands of people are taking to the streets and calling for an emergency ceasefire as horrifying images and reports of widespread civilian suffering and death continue to emerge from Gaza. Thousands marched for a ceasefire in Brooklyn on Saturday, and more than 100 were arrested for blocking traffic at various demonstrations in the tri-state region over the weekend, according to local reports.

In Philadelphia, activists in solidarity with Palestinians are calling out local media for allegedly downplaying or outright failing to cover a march and rally over the weekend that attracted a giant mass of people (video below) to the steps of the city's iconic art museum. The rally was organized by the Philly Palestine Coalition and its allies. Participants estimated that thousands of people showed up to the march and rally.

"It was one of the largest demonstrations I've been to in Philly since at least 2020, and it was a real disappointment that local media chose not to cover it," Munira Lokhandwala, a protester who attended the rally on Saturday, said in an interview.

Palestinian solidarity activists called out local media for failing to cover a massive rally demanding a ceasefire in Gaza in Philadelphia over the weekend.

Minneapolis saw a police investigation on Monday after a car drove into a crowd of activists who were directing traffic near a large pro-Palestine rally over the weekend. The driver allegedly threatened the protesters, but no one was injured. Rallies large and small calling for a ceasefire in Gaza are being held in cities and on campuses in every corner of the nation as well as across the globe.

Airstrikes have devastated Gaza for more than two weeks as Israel prepares for a bloody ground invasion. Palestinian and international human rights groups say the Israel Defense Forces are indiscriminately targeting civilians and residential buildings, mosques, schools and hospitals while starving Gazans of food, fuel and clean water in an attempt to displace more than 1 million people and turn the strip into rubble.

Health officials in Gaza said the death toll rose to 5,700 on Tuesday after hundreds of people were killed in Israeli airstrikes overnight. About 62 percent of those killed are women and children, while more than 15,000 people are injured, many of them unable to act on Israeli evacuation orders, according to the United Nations.

A deluge of rallies, direct actions, phone zaps and letter writing campaigns is underway as President Joe Biden and other U.S. leaders continue to express support for Israel and pledge billions of dollars in aid despite violent and dehumanizing rhetoric from Israeli officials. Last week, UN human rights experts warned the world about the potential for genocide in Gaza.

“Considering statements made by Israeli political leaders and their allies, accompanied by military action in Gaza and escalation of arrests and killing in the West Bank, there is also a risk of genocide against the Palestinian People,” the experts said in a statement.

Many U.S. protests are being organized by Jewish Voice for Peace and IfNotNow, two peace groups that organize in synagogues and Jewish communities to oppose U.S. aid that supports Israeli apartheid and occupation of Palestine. Last week, 500 Jewish activist and allies were arrested at the Capitol in Washington, D.C. during a nonviolent sit-in and rally organized the groups’ national chapters. Palestinian-led groups are also organizing rallies, with Palestinian Youth Movement, National Students for Justice in Palestine, Al-Awda: The Palestine Right to Return Coalition, and others calling for a mass rally in Washington, D.C. on November 4.

Elie Katzman-Jacobson, a member of IfNotNow’s Chicago chapter who participated on Monday’s protest and sit-in, said activists took direct action as the Chicago City Council and high-profile politicians continue show “uncritical support for Israel” despite the humanitarian tragedy in Gaza. The activists are demanding that Illinois Senators Tammy Duckworth and Dick Durbin call for an “immediate ceasefire and end to Israel’s atrocities in Gaza.” Katzman-Jacobson pointed to Israeli leaders who have spoken of the invasion in genocidal terms.

“This is an emergency; this is following continuing dehumanization of both Palestinians and Israelis that has led to deaths not only in Palestine and Israel, but in our own communities in Chicago across the United States,” Katzman-Jacobson told Truthout in an interview. “And we know what happens — especially as Jews — when we see dehumanizing language, and it only leads quickly to escalating violence.”

Now, activists are putting mounting pressure on members of Congress to join a handful of progressive lawmakers who have already called for a ceasefire. “Because this is an emergency, what we are doing now is what is needed at this moment, and that is demanding an immediate deescalation, ceasefire and return of hostages,” Katzman-Jacobson said. “After the ceasefire, we know we can’t return to the status quo, because that is a daily nightmare for Palestinians, and that includes dismantling systems of apartheid and the blank check the U.S. sends to Israel.”

Duckworth, for example, expressed “unwavering” support for Israel shortly after the October 7 cross-border Hamas attack left 1,400 dead in communities outside the barricaded Gaza Strip, but she has since called for humanitarian assistance into Gaza and spoken out against anti-Muslim hate speech after young a Palestinian boy was murdered in Illinois.

However, both Duckworth and Durbin have showed support for Biden’s proposed \$14 billion in additional aid to Israel, even as the White House cautions the Israeli government against launching a hasty invasion of Gaza that would endanger the lives of more civilians and hostages. Hamas has released two American and two Israeli hostages, but dozens remain hidden in Gaza.

At least a dozen House Democrats have signed onto a resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire, and protesters are pushing for more to take a stand for peace.

“Any additional military aid would be allowing Israel to continue to commit war crimes, and especially what Biden is calling for — \$14 billion — and that’s on top of the \$3.8 billion in U.S. aid annually,” Katzman-Jacobson said. “And we are saying that Biden and our political leaders must do everything in their power to prevent more loss of life, and we can’t stand by while our tax dollars are being used to justify war crimes and genocide in Gaza.”

On October 19, 100 civil society organizations, including Palestinian organizations documenting civilian casualties and war crimes, joined the International Network of Genocide Scholars in signing a letter to the International Criminal Court demanding prosecutors investigate and issue arrest warrants for war crimes

committed by Israel in Gaza. According to the letter:

Our work has been compromised and obstructed by the intensity of Israel's widespread and systematic bombing of Gaza. Our staff have been displaced from their homes, some of their homes have been bombed and destroyed, others have lost family members. They lack electricity, water and functioning internet, and it is too dangerous to move around the Gaza Strip. If the Israeli military continues to strike the Gaza Strip at such a scale and intensity, the entire 25-mile-Strip will be one big crime scene with no surviving witnesses to provide testimony, and no victims on the ground to participate in proceedings or to seek reparations.

Meanwhile, Gazans are trying to push reports from the ground into the Western media as disinformation clouds mainstream media coverage. Raji Sourani, a leading human rights attorney in Gaza and director of the Palestinian Centre for Human rights, appeared on Democracy Now! on Monday after an Israeli airstrike destroyed his home in the Tel al-Hawa neighborhood of Gaza City.

"So, U.S. and Mr. Biden — I'm saying to him — you are complicit. You are part of these crimes, because you are allowing, with your arms, civilians to be targeted and killed," Sourani said. "We have almost 1,200 people for almost two weeks under the wreckage and under the destroyed houses, unable to be recovered."

Refaat Alareer, a writer and translator in Gaza, reported on Sunday that Israel bombed, without warning, the residential building in Tel al-Hawa where he was living and was caring for evacuees fleeing airstrikes and destroyed homes in other parts of Gaza.

"Since Israel's attack began, we have helped countless numbers of people to pump water, charge their electronic devices and keep their freezers functional," Alareer reported at The Electronic Intifada. "I believe that is a reason why our building was hit. We were helping people to live a 'normal' life, despite Israel's attempts to starve us and eliminate the possibility of living with dignity."

Alareer said his family was lucky to survive, but others in his building did not, including a mother and her two teenage daughters who were cooking in the kitchen when the building was hit. Truthout has not independently verified Alareer's account, but the BBC reported on Monday that Israeli airstrikes hit the same neighborhood in Gaza City and destroyed buildings near a hospital where a civilians and overwhelmed medical workers were living a "state of terror" amid a "catastrophic" situation for human health.

"By some estimates, Israel has not issued warnings more than 90 percent of the times it has attacked Palestinian homes," Alareer wrote. "That explains the huge numbers of people who have been killed. It explains how many families have been eliminated from the civil records."

Jewish peace activists say that a ceasefire and the release of both Israeli hostages held in Gaza and hundreds of Palestinian political prisoners is urgently needed to prevent further loss of life, but they are also thinking about next steps.

Ashley Bohrer, a member of Jewish Voice for Peace in Chicago who joined the direct action on Monday, said a political solution in Israel and Palestine will only be possible when there is an end to the segregation, evictions, dispossession and violence enforced by the Israeli security state on Palestinian population every day. People in the U.S. are uniquely positioned to oppose apartheid and occupation because our government provides tacit political permission and billions of dollars in aid to the Israeli security state.

"That's a big project, but if you want to prevent this from happening again, the immediate next step from getting a ceasefire and stopping the ongoing assault on Gaza is dismantling the conditions that led us to this moment," Bohrer said in an interview.

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