

U.S. president says he can't believe the death toll from sources in Gaza

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Washington, October 27 (RHC)-- The list of Palestinians killed in the war in Gaza fills up more than 150 pages, at times featuring dozens of people with the same last name: entire families that have been wiped out by Israeli air attacks.

The Palestinian Health Ministry in Gaza released the list on Thursday, documenting the deaths of more than 7,000 Palestinians, including nearly 3,000 children, since the war that began on October 7th.

Each name is paired with a government identification number — a step meant to indicate transparency.

But less than 24 hours earlier, U.S. President Joe Biden cast doubt over the figures, saying that he has “no confidence in the number that the Palestinians are using.”

“I have no notion that the Palestinians are telling the truth about how many people are killed,” Biden said on Wednesday.

For Palestinian rights advocates, the U.S. president’s comments are another episode in his administration’s push to “dehumanise” Palestinians and dismiss their suffering, as Washington continues to support Israel’s bombing campaign.

Moreover, critics were quick to point out that human rights experts, including at the United Nations, have long found the Palestinian Health Ministry’s data to be reliable.

Palestinian American activist Zeina Ashrawi Hutchison said Biden’s remarks seem to question Palestinians’ humanity “even in death.” “The president’s statements are outrageous, irresponsible and flat-out racist and anti-Palestinian,” she told Al Jazeera.

Biden’s publicly professed doubts come as the U.S. continues to resist calls for a ceasefire and instead continues to pledge military support for Israel.

Yara Asi, a Palestinian American public health expert at the University of Central Florida, called the president’s remarks “appalling.” “To dispute those figures was really, really just putting both feet in with Israel on this, in yet another way that dehumanises Palestinians,” Asi told Al Jazeera.

With Israel preventing foreign journalists or researchers from entering Gaza as the conflict intensifies, the territory’s health ministry has become the go-to source for understanding the Palestinian death count.

While it is difficult — if not impossible — to independently verify the numbers released from Gaza, Omar Shakir, the Israel and Palestine director at Human Rights Watch (HRW), said the ministry’s data has often reflected the nonprofit’s own research.

Shakir said when HRW previously conducted its own investigations into past attacks on Palestinians, it did not find major discrepancies between its findings and the numbers provided by the health ministry. “Human Rights Watch has been working in the occupied Palestinian territories for three decades. We’ve covered rounds of escalations and hostilities, and we’ve always found the numbers from the Ministry of Health to be generally reliable,” Shakir said.

He distinguished formal figures released by the ministry from comments made by individual health officials in Gaza, saying that the ministry has access to data from hospitals and morgues, which allows it to more accurately assess the death toll. In fact, Thursday’s report noted that the current death toll does not include people who have been killed but were not brought to hospitals or registered at morgues.

Israeli army is bombarding southern Gaza where it told 1.1 million Palestinians to move for their safety. Shakir also noted that the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) relies on the health authority’s data, which has also been cited by the U.S. State Department.

In the current war, the Israeli military has said it dropped thousands of bombs on Gaza, including 6,000 in the first six days alone.

“We’ve been looking at satellite imagery. We’ve been looking at what’s taking place. The numbers coming out of the ministry are not beyond reason,” Shakir said. “They’re within the range of what one would expect from air strikes of this intensity.”

An OCHA spokesperson in the occupied Palestinian territories also told Al Jazeera on Thursday that the UN agency continues to use the ministry’s figures. “The United Nations relies on the Health Ministry in Gaza as a source for casualties figures in that area,” the spokesperson said in an email.

“We continue to include their data in our reporting and it is clearly sourced. It is nearly impossible at the moment to provide any UN verification on a day-to-day basis.”

On top of casting doubt over Palestinian accounts, the Biden administration has consistently rejected any independent investigations into suspected Israeli war crimes, including by the International Criminal Court. For example, U.S. State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said earlier this week that an international investigation into the explosion at the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital that killed hundreds of people in Gaza would not be “appropriate at this time”.

Instead, he cited what he said was Israeli evidence that the explosion at the hospital was caused by a misfired Palestinian rocket. Palestinian officials have said the explosion was the result of an Israeli attack.

Likewise, when Israeli forces killed Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh last year, Israel’s authorities initially claimed that the reporter was shot by Palestinian gunmen. In turn, the Biden administration also opposed any formal, independent investigation into the incident.

Several Palestinian Americans told Al Jazeera that Biden’s statement about the Palestinian death toll only furthers the case that he is wholeheartedly adopting the Israeli government’s narratives at the expense of Palestinian victims.

“As if the president hadn’t already been complicit enough in the dehumanisation of Palestinians, now he says he doesn’t trust us when we say we are being murdered,” Palestinian American activist and comedian Amer Zahr told Al Jazeera.

“How much lower could one stoop than to say we are lying about dying?”

For her part, Asi, the public health expert, said the Biden administration understands that civilian casualties are “extremely unpopular.” “So if you both cast doubt on Palestinian numbers but support no investigations — not even foreign journalists entering Gaza — what you’re really saying is: The death count does not matter because we’re going to support this regardless. We’re going to find ways to justify it,” she said.

Dana El Kurd, a non-resident senior fellow at the Arab Center Washington DC, echoed Asi’s comments. “This is incredibly dehumanising and casts suspicion around Palestinians writ large,” El Kurd told Al Jazeera. “The assumption is that they are always lying and that they are always inaccurate narrators of what’s happening to them.”

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