

Washington denies giving Tel Aviv green light to raid Gazan hospital, but refuses to condemn military operation

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Israeli soldiers invade Al Shifa hospital complex, amid their ground operation against

Palestinian armed group Hamas [Israeli Defence Forces/Handout via Reuters]

Washington, November 16 (RHC)-- The United States has denied giving Israel a green light for a raid on al-Shifa Hospital in the Gaza Strip after backing Israeli claims that the medical facility was being used for military purposes.

Speaking on Wednesday, U.S. National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby countered accusations from Hamas that President Joe Biden's administration was complicit in the raid.

"We did not give an OK to their military operations around the hospital," Kirby told reporters.

Kirby declined to say whether Israel gave the U.S. advanced warning of the attack during talks between Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday. "I won't go into detail about the conversation," he said, adding that "there's no expectation by the United States to map it all out."

The U.S. had previously stated that an intelligence assessment backed up Israel's claims that al-Shifa Hospital, the largest in Gaza, sat atop a large Hamas command centre.

Kirby said the U.S. remained "comfortable with our own intelligence assessment."

Israeli forces raided al-Shifa, which is sheltering hundreds of patients and thousands of displaced Palestinians, early on Wednesday, drawing alarm from international organizations and political leaders.

"Hospitals are not battlegrounds," the United Nations undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs and its emergency relief coordinator, Martin Griffiths, said in a social media post in response to the raid.

While Biden had called on Israel to take "less intrusive action" at al-Shifa on Monday, Israel does not appear to have taken those demands seriously. "It really does underscore that even as the U.S. is supporting – not just in spirit but also militarily in billions of dollars annually – Israel's 'defense', as they call it, the Israelis are really proceeding against the wishes, sometimes, of the United States," Al Jazeera's Kimberly Halkett reported from the White House.

Omar Zaqout, an emergency room worker at the Gaza City facility, told Al Jazeera that Israeli soldiers "detained and brutally assaulted" some of those seeking shelter at the hospital. The attack followed several days of encirclement by Israeli forces. Hospital staff said on Tuesday that they were barred from exiting the facility and they were forced to bury decomposing bodies in a mass grave.

The Israeli military said its troops found an operational command centre and assets belonging to Hamas in its raids on the hospital, but it has not produced any firm evidence to substantiate the claim that it is a central node of Hamas operations.

Israeli military spokesperson Daniel Hagari said the troops had found weapons, combat gear and technological equipment there and were continuing their search.

The military also released a video that they said showed some of the materials recovered from an undisclosed building in the hospital compound, including automatic weapons, grenades, ammunition and flak jackets.

The Ministry of Health in Gaza said on Wednesday that the Israeli military did not find any weapons when it stormed the hospital. "The occupation forces did not find any [military] equipment or weapons in the hospital. Essentially, we don't allow this [weapons in a hospital]," Munir al-Bursh, Health Ministry director, said in a statement.

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