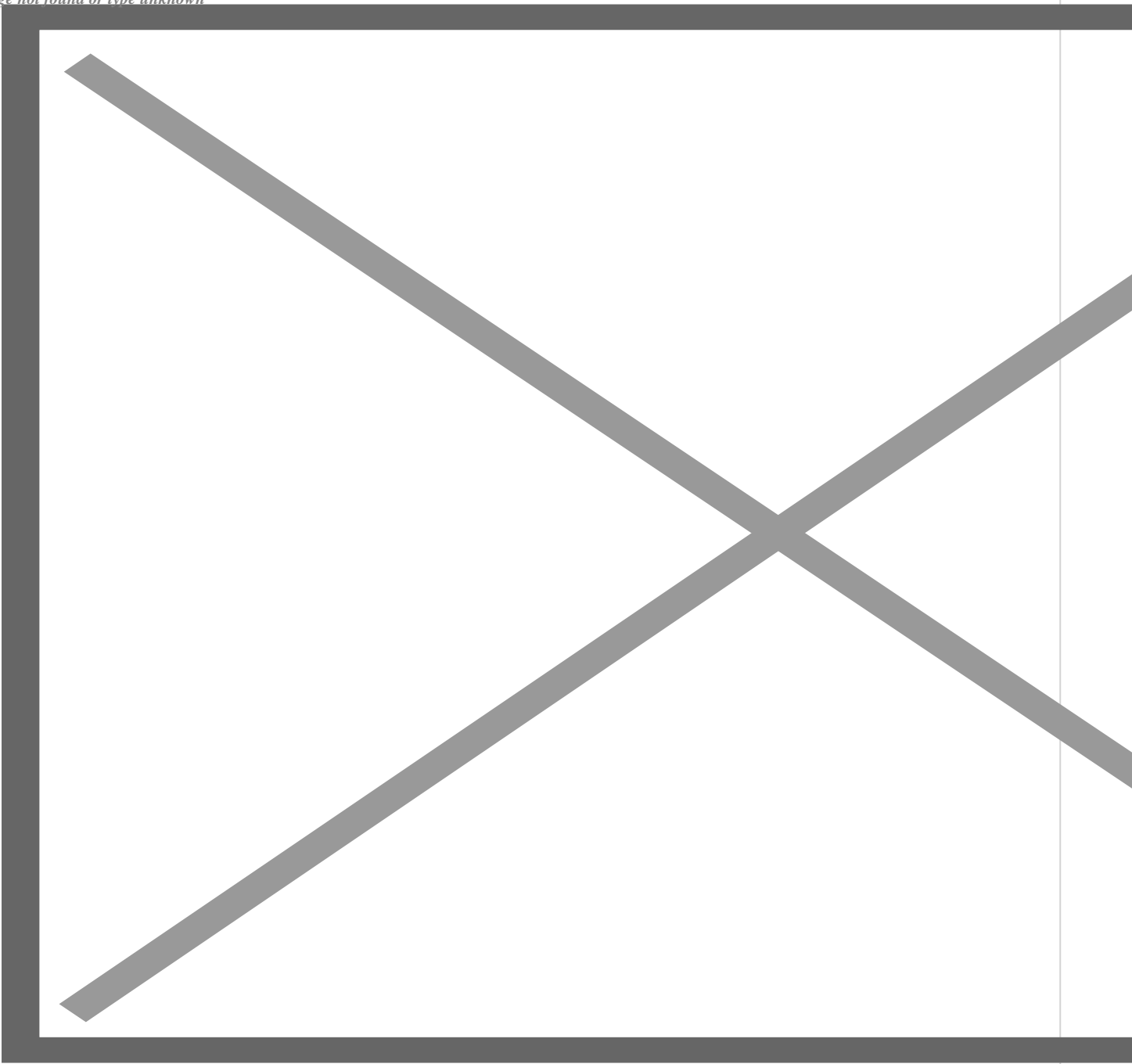


Hospitals cut off as Israel batters southern Gaza

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A Palestinian man pulls his dead son from under the rubble

Khan Younis, January 22 (RHC)-- Israeli shells have battered Khan Younis, cutting off two hospitals as the city in southern Gaza saw the bloodiest fighting since the New Year. Tanks closed in on Al-Amal Hospital and Al-Khair Hospital on Monday, part of an Israeli offensive that began last week to take control of Khan Younis, with Israel saying the city is now the main headquarters of the Palestinian group Hamas.

The bombardment marks a revitalised Israeli offensive in the war, which began on October 7 when Hamas attacked Israel, killing some 1,139 people. Israel's retaliation has killed 25,295 Palestinians since. Residents told AFP that it was the most intense bombing they had witnessed since the war began.

The fighting around the hospitals has made the provision of medical care difficult and halted most ambulance services, cutting the wounded off from medical care.

Attack drones have targeted hospitals and Al-Aqsa University, the enclave's largest, as the area is bombed by land, air and sea, with no safe corridor for people to escape, said Al Jazeera's Hani Mahmoud, reporting from Rafah in southern Gaza. Israeli ground troops were also assaulting residential buildings, he added.

The city, under heavy bombardment for over a month, was once designated a "safe zone" by Israel, with thousands having fled there from the north. "Now it's just a scene of devastation and suffering as Israeli forces push deeper into the city," Mahmoud said.

The Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) reported that its ambulance centre had been attacked, preventing first responders from reaching the wounded. The rescue agency also said it had lost contact with its staff at its Khan Younis main base.

Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, just like all the hospitals in southern Gaza, is also under intense attack, PRCS spokesperson Nebal Farsakh told Al Jazeera, with ambulances unable to respond to calls.

Health officials said at least 20 dead bodies had arrived overnight when the hospital was still accessible. "The occupation has overnight launched an unprecedented ground and air war on Khan Younis. People are trapped near Mawasi, people are trapped in Al-Amal Hospital, in Al-Aqsa University. People are carrying the dead and wounded on donkey carts," said a medic inside Nasser Hospital.

Gaza Ministry of Health spokesperson Ashraf Al-Qudra said that dozens of dead and wounded were trapped in areas targeted by Israeli troops.

"The Israeli occupation is preventing ambulance vehicles from moving to recover bodies of martyrs and the wounded from western Khan Younis," he said.

It seems there's little chance that the fighting will ease in the near future. Israel's Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said on Monday that military operations will not only continue, but will be expanded.

The majority of Gaza's 2.3 million residents are now caged in two towns, Deir el-Balah and Rafah, just north and south of Khan Younis respectively.

Around 85 percent of the territory's population has been displaced, with thousands sheltering in United Nations-run camps in squalid conditions, with disease and hunger rife. "Very dark days ahead as the situation gets worse by the hour," said Mahmoud.

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