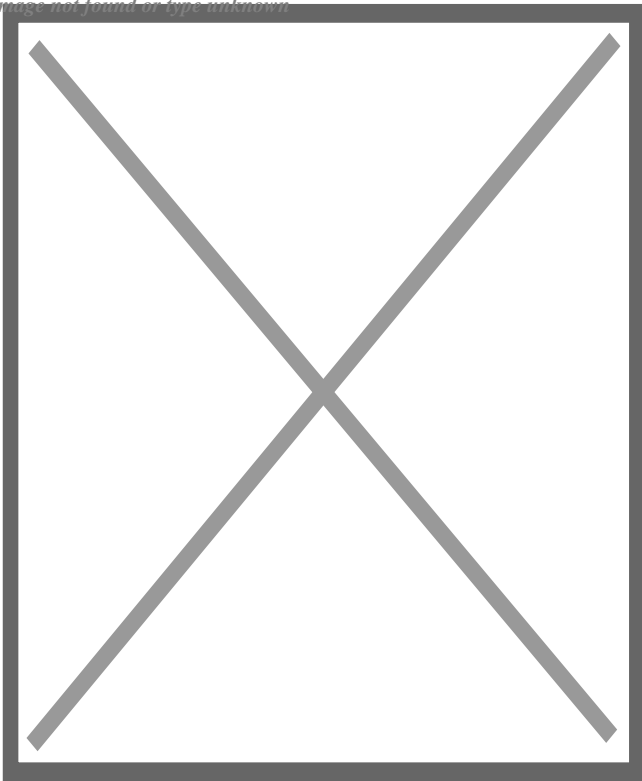


UN secretary-general urges Israel to halt escalation and engage in ceasefire talks

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United Nations, May 7 (RHC)-- United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres has expressed deep concern over Israel's military attack on the southern city of Rafah in the Gaza Strip, urging the occupying regime to stop further escalation and engage in the ongoing ceasefire talks.

Guterres made the remarks in a press conference on Tuesday, after the Israeli military shut down the Rafah and Kerem Shalom crossings with Egypt. "I am disturbed and distressed by the renewed military activity in Rafah. The closure of both the Rafah and Karem Shalom crossings is especially damaging to an already dire humanitarian situation. They must be re-opened immediately."

The UN chief further warned Israel that an assault on the southern city of Rafah would "be a strategic mistake, a political calamity, and a humanitarian nightmare. He also called on the Israeli regime "to stop

any escalation, and engage constructively in the ongoing diplomatic talks,” stressing that “civilians have suffered enough death and destruction” since the war began in early October last year.

“Make no mistake - a full-scale assault on Rafah will be a human catastrophe,” he said.

On Tuesday, the Israeli military seized control of the Rafah border crossing after advancing during the night through heavy bombardment of residential areas. The incursion came after the Palestinian resistance movement Hamas said it had agreed to a ceasefire proposal put forward by mediators Qatar and Egypt.

About 1.5 million Palestinians are sheltering in Rafah. The city had been designated a “safe zone” by the Israeli military. Palestinians are now struggling to evacuate Rafah since the Israeli military dropped leaflets ordering them to leave.

UN agencies and humanitarian organizations are warning about the severe impact of an Israeli military operation in Rafah.

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