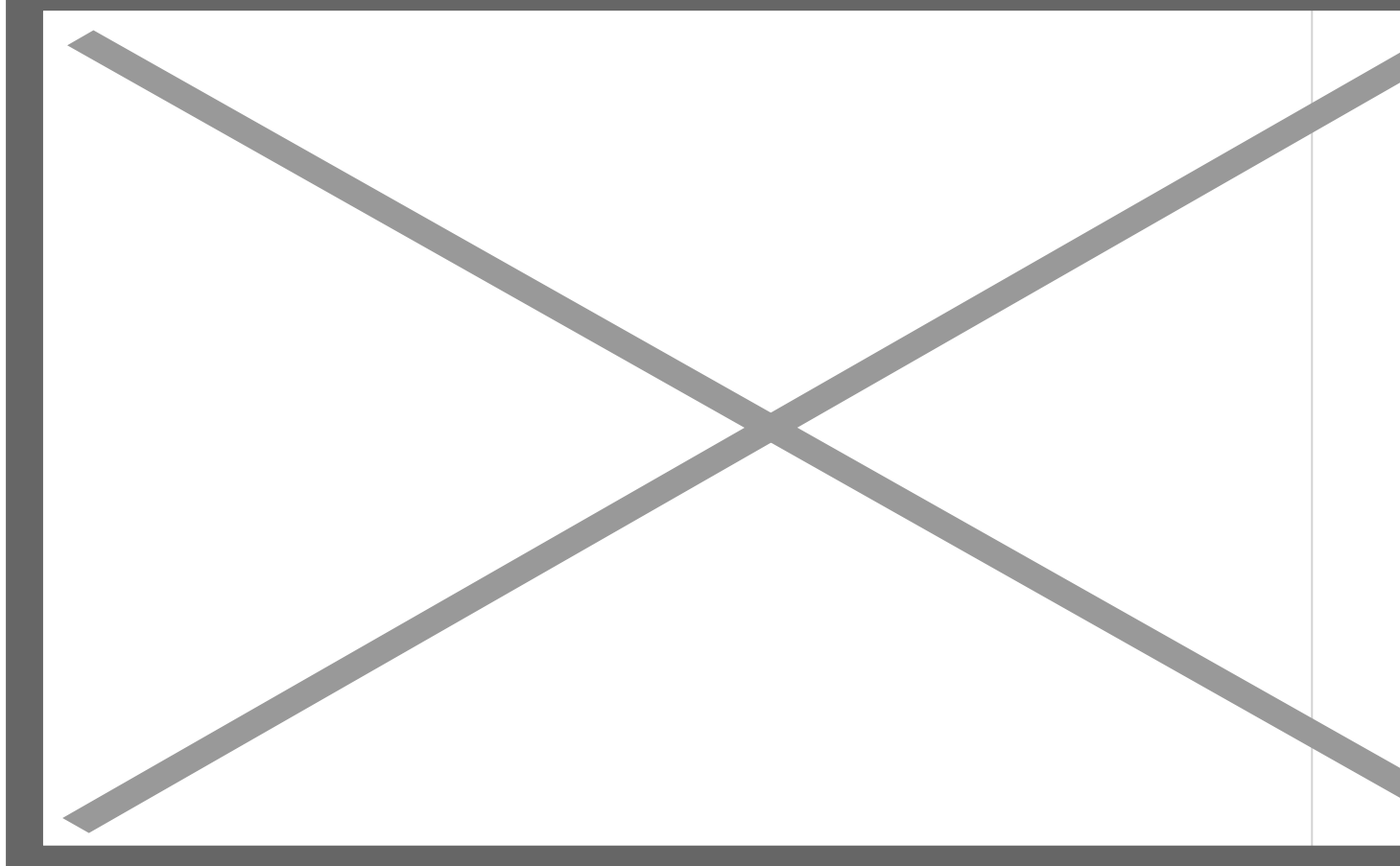


Washington tries to justify Rafah assault, saying it was legitimate and no big deal

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Israeli tanks roll in to Gaza on Tuesday morning

Washington, May 7 (RHC)-- The United States has played down the deadly Israeli assault on Rafah, saying the offensive appears to be "limited" despite concerns over the fate of the more than 1.5 million Palestinians sheltering in the southern Gaza city.

State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller told reporters on Tuesday that the U.S. still opposes a major Israeli offensive against Rafah.

Israel had stepped up its bombardment of Rafah on Monday, killing dozens of people after ordering about 100,000 residents in its eastern areas to evacuate. Israeli troops also stormed the Palestinian side of the Rafah border crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, which serves as a major gateway for humanitarian aid.

“This military operation that they launched last night was targeted just to Rafah gate,” Miller said on Tuesday. “It wasn’t an operation in the civilian areas that they had ordered to be evacuated. So we will continue to make clear that we oppose a major military operation in Rafah.”

Still, Miller acknowledged that the attack on the crossing “does look like the prelude” to a larger offensive.

The Israeli attack closed the Rafah crossing, further straining the already inadequate flow of humanitarian aid to Gaza. Since October 9th, Israel has intensified its existing blockade on the territory, bringing the Palestinian enclave to the verge of famine.

The Rafah crossing also serves as an entry point for humanitarian workers going into Gaza, and critically sick and injured people use it to leave the territory and receive treatment abroad.

The Palestinian Ministry of Health in Gaza said 120 patients who were set to cross from Gaza to Egypt for treatment were prevented from leaving on Tuesday. Shutting down the crossing also has blocked medical supplies and fuel needed to operate the remaining medical centres in the territory, the ministry said.

“The situation of patients in Gaza hospitals has been very difficult since the beginning of the war due to the loss of medical equipment and the total collapse of the health system,” the ministry said in a statement. “We have travel lists for sick and injured people in the thousands. And now they are prevented from leaving.”

At the U.S. State Department, Miller called for reopening the crossing, but he also appeared to justify the Israeli attack that closed it. “ Hamas did control the Gaza side of Rafah crossing, and Hamas was continuing to collect revenue from that crossing being open,” he told reporters.

“So it is a legitimate goal to try and deprive Hamas from revenue, money that they could use to continue to finance their terrorist activities. That said, we want to see the crossing open, and we’re gonna work to try to get it back open.”

On Saturday, Israel also closed the Karem Abu Salem border crossing, also known as Kerem Shalom, barring aid trucks after Hamas launched a rocket attack on Israeli troops nearby, killing four soldiers.

On Tuesday, Miller falsely said the crossing between Gaza and Israel was “bombed” by Hamas when the crossing itself was not targeted. When pressed about his assertion, Miller said: “You could make that argument it was that strike at Kerem Shalom that precipitated its closure.”

The Israeli seizure of the Rafah gate came hours after Hamas said it had agreed to a ceasefire proposal from Egypt and Qatar that would see the release of Israeli captives in Gaza in exchange for Palestinian prisoners held by Israel, as well as an eventual end to the war.

Israel rejected the deal but said it would engage in further negotiations.

The administration of U.S. President Joe Biden has been heavily involved in the talks. On Tuesday, Miller declined to provide many details about where things stand, but he denied that Hamas had actually accepted the agreement.

Instead, he said the Palestinian group responded to the proposal with suggestions as part of the negotiations process. “We’ve continued to believe that there is space to reach a deal, and we are trying incredibly hard to push one over the line,” he said.

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