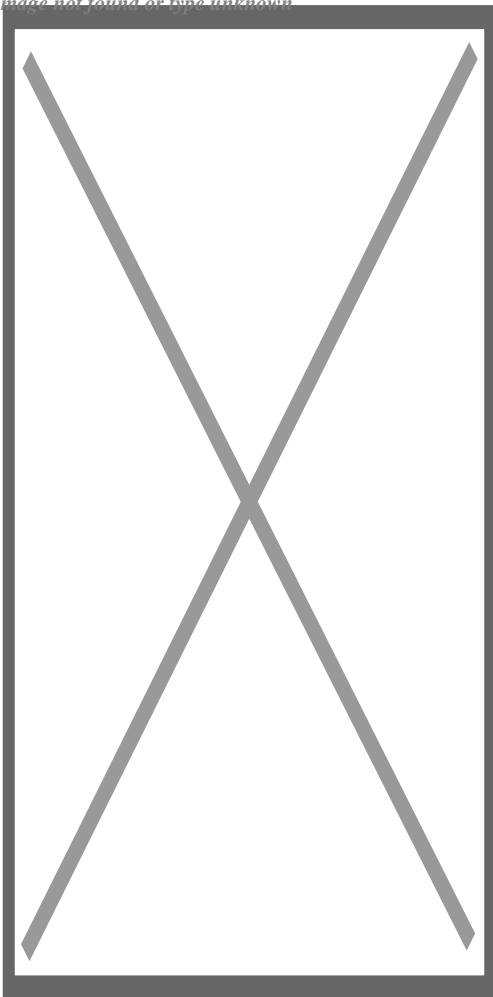


Israeli forces kill dozens of Palestinians in strikes across Gaza Strip

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Rafah, May 24 (RHC)-- Israeli forces have killed at least 50 Palestinians in aerial and ground bombardments across the Gaza Strip and battled in close combat with Hamas-led fighters in the southern city of Rafah, health officials and the armed wing of Hamas say.

Israeli tanks advanced in Rafah's southeast, edged towards the city's western district of Yibna and continued to operate in three eastern suburbs, residents said on Thursday.

"The occupation [Israeli forces] is trying to move farther to the west. They are on the edge of Yibna, which is densely populated. They didn't invade it yet," one resident told the Reuters news agency, asking not to be named.

"We hear explosions, and we see black smoke coming up from the areas where the army has invaded. It was another very difficult night," he said.

Simultaneous Israeli assaults on the northern and southern edges of Gaza this month have caused a new exodus of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fleeing their homes and have cut off the main access routes for aid, raising the risk of famine.

The international community, including Israel's closest ally, the United States, warned it against launching a ground assault on Rafah without a credible plan to protect civilians. It has been widely criticized for its operations in the city, including from the U.S., but Israel says it must move in against several battalions of Hamas fighters there.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, the main aid agency operating in Gaza, estimated as of Monday that more than 800,000 people had fled Rafah since Israel began targeting the city in early May.

Suze van Meegan, the Norwegian Refugee Council's emergency response leader in Gaza, said many civilians were still stuck there. "The city of Rafah is now comprised of three entirely different worlds: the east is an archetypal war zone, the middle is a ghost town, and the west is a congested mass of people living in deplorable conditions," she said in a statement.

In parallel, Israeli forces stepped up a ground offensive in northern Gaza's Jabalia refugee camp, where the military has razed several residential areas. It has also struck the nearby town of Beit Hanoon. Israel previously declared major operations over in these areas months ago but says it has had to return to prevent Hamas from regrouping there.

At least 12 Palestinians were killed in an air strike on a store belonging to the welfare ministry east of Deir el-Balah in the central Gaza Strip, Wafa, the official Palestinian news agency, reported.

Gaza's Civil Defence agency said two predawn air strikes killed 26 people, including 15 children, in Gaza City. Civil Defence spokesman Mahmud Bassal said one strike hit a family's house, killing 16 people, in the al-Daraj area and another killed 10 people inside a mosque compound.

A separate Israeli attack on a house in central Gaza's Nuseirat refugee camp killed eight more people.

A senior security official, Daa Aldeen Al-Shurafa, was killed in an Israeli strike as he toured residential districts of Gaza City, the Gaza Ministry of Interior said.

Israel has imposed severe restrictions on deliveries of water, food, medicines and fuel, forcing several hospitals across Gaza to shut down. On Thursday, the Ministry of Health said "minutes" of fuel remained to power generators at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir el-Balah, adding that the care of 1,300 patients would soon cease.



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