

More Palestinians killed as Israeli forces pound southern and northern Gaza

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Israel's offensive has so far killed nearly 38,000 people and has left the heavily built-up coastal enclave in ruins [Eyad Baba/AFP]

Gaza City, July 1 (RHC)-- At least six Palestinians have been killed in Gaza's southern city of Rafah, according to the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS), and several homes have been destroyed as Israeli forces pushed deeper into the city and pressed further into Shujayea in northern Gaza.

Israeli tanks, which re-entered Shujayea four days ago, fired shells towards several houses, leaving families trapped inside and unable to leave, residents said.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimated that "60,000 to 80,000 people were displaced" from Shujayea in recent days. For those who remain, "our lives have become hell", said 50-year-old resident Siham al-Shawa.

She told the AFP news agency that people were trapped as strikes could happen "anywhere" and "it is difficult to get out of the neighborhood under fire." "We do not know where to go to protect ourselves," she said.

Al Jazeera's Tareq Abu Azzoum, reporting from Deir el-Balah, said residents who managed to flee the neighbourhood say the scale of destruction is "massive." He said the central areas of Gaza City have also been "pounded" by Israeli forces.

"In the past hour, a residential flat was targeted. Medical sources we've talked to say at least 15 people have been killed today in the north after people's homes were directly hit by artillery shells," Abu Azzoum said.

He noted that in Rafah, there was a continuation of "indiscriminate Israeli attacks as residents flee for their lives." "In the al-Mawasi district – declared a 'safe zone' by Israel's military – they've been setting fire to makeshift tent camps where displaced Palestinians have been sheltering," he added.

Speaking at a weekly cabinet meeting on Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu repeated his stance that there was no substitute for victory in the war against Hamas. "We are committed to fighting until we achieve all of our objectives: Eliminating Hamas, returning all of our hostages, ensuring that Gaza never again constitutes a threat to Israel and returning our residents securely to their homes in the south and the north," he said.

Senior Hamas official Osama Hamdan meanwhile said there's been no progress in ceasefire talks. He said on Saturday that the Palestinian group is still ready to discuss any truce proposal that ends the nearly nine-month assault.

While the offensive focused on Gaza, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, one man was killed and five were wounded in an Israeli strike near the city of Tulkarem, according to the Palestinian health ministry.

The armed wing of Hamas and the allied Palestinian Islamic Jihad reported fierce fighting in both Shujayea and Rafah, saying their fighters had fired antitank rockets and mortar bombs against Israeli forces operating there.

Arab mediators' efforts, backed by the United States, have stalled. Hamas says any deal must end the offensive and bring a full Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. Israel says it will accept only temporary pauses in the fighting until Hamas, which has governed Gaza since 2007, is eradicated.

The Palestinian health ministry said 43 bodies of slain Palestinians arrived at hospitals in the last 24-hour reporting period. At least 111 others were wounded.

Israel's offensive has so far killed at least 37,877 people, according to the Gaza health ministry, and has left the heavily built-up coastal enclave in ruins.

Israeli tanks pushed deeper into several districts in the east, west and centre of Rafah, near the border with Egypt, on Sunday, and medics said six people had been killed in an Israeli strike on a house in Shaboura, in the heart of the city.

Six bodies from the Zurub family were transferred to Nasser Hospital in the nearby city of Khan Younis, where dozens of relatives paid their respects.

Residents said the Israeli army had torched the Al-Awda mosque in the centre of Rafah, one of the city's best known.

Israel has said its military operations in Rafah are aimed at eradicating the last armed battalions of Hamas. It continues to severely restrict the entry of much-needed humanitarian aid, medicine, and fuel into the enclave, which is on the verge of famine.

The United Nations and other relief agencies have voiced alarm over the dire humanitarian crisis and the threat of starvation that the assault and Israeli siege have brought for Gaza's 2.4 million people.

"Everything is rubble," said Louise Wateridge from the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), speaking Friday from the city of Khan Younis.

"There's no water there, there's no sanitation, there's no food. And now, people are living back in these buildings that are empty shells."

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA AND NEWS AGENCIES

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