

Israel pounding Gaza as pressure grows for truce

International Desk

Israel kept up deadly strikes on the besieged Gaza Strip on Sunday despite growing international calls for a cease-fire.

Fighting raged on in the bloodiest ever Gaza war, now in its third month, that started with the Hamas attacks on October 7, and has devastated much of the Palestinian territory, sparking global concern.

Israel also came under growing pressure to secure the release of captives still held in the Hamas-run territory.

The regime stepped up its bombardment of Gaza overnight and into Sunday, killing at least 40 people, Palestinians said, after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu argued that the only way to secure the release of captives was intense military pressure on Hamas.

The Israeli attacks took place amid fierce fighting in the length of the coastal enclave, according to residents and militants, with communications down for a fourth day, making it hard to reach the wounded.

Call for durable truce

French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna, the latest foreign envoy visiting Israel, called for an "immediate and durable" truce leading to a lasting cease-fire, stressing that "too many civilians are being killed".

Her British and German counterparts, David Cameron and Annalena Baerbock, also bemoaned the high civilian toll but voiced a different stance on the conflict, in a joint Sunday Times article. The pair wrote that they "support a cease-fire, but only if it is sustainable... We do not believe that calling right now for a general and immediate cease-fire, hoping it somehow becomes permanent, is the way forward".

'Breakdown of civil order'

Israel's bombardment of Gaza has left much of the territory in ruins, with the UN estimating 1.9 million Gazans have been displaced by the war and warning of a "breakdown of civil order".

"I would not be surprised if people start dying of hunger, or a combination of hunger, disease, weak immunity," said Philippe Lazzarini, the head of the

UN agency for Palestinian refugees.

"The communication blackout in #Gaza is the longest since the start of the Israeli escalation," the Palestinian Red Crescent said on X, adding that its teams were also hampered by shelling.

WHO sounds alarm

The UN's World Health Organisation also sounded the alarm over Gaza's humanitarian disaster after visiting the largest hospital, Gaza City's Al-Shifa, weeks after it was raided by Israeli forces.

The visiting WHO team "described the emergency department as a 'blood-bath', with hundreds of injured patients inside, and new patients arriving every minute", the organization said.

"Patients with trauma injuries were being sutured on the floor," it said, while "tens of thousands of displaced people are using the hospital building and grounds for shelter" amid "a severe shortage" of water and food.

The Israeli regime has come under growing pressure, including from its top ally, the United States, but also from families of captives, to either slow, suspend or end the mili-



Palestinians inspect the site of an Israeli strike on a house, amid the ongoing war on Gaza, in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, December 17, 2023. REUTERS

tary campaign.

Relatives of captives again rallied in Tel Aviv on Saturday to call for an urgent deal to release them after the army admitted to mistakenly killing three captives in Gaza.

Israel kills captives

Israel Defense Force troops mistakenly identified three Israeli captives in northern Gaza's Shejaiya neighborhood as a threat and opened fire on them, killing them, IDF spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said Friday evening.

Netanyahu said the killing of the three hostages "broke my heart". But he added, "With all the deep sorrow, I want to clarify: the military pressure is necessary both for the return of the kidnapped and for achieving victory over our enemies". Nonetheless, according to reports, talks involv-

ing mediator Qatar have resumed toward another truce after a week-long cease-fire last month allowed for the prisoner swap.

Qatar in a statement on Saturday reaffirmed its "ongoing diplomatic efforts to renew the humanitarian pause". But Hamas said on Telegram it was "against any negotiations for the exchange of prisoners until the aggression against our people ceases completely". The Gaza war has also seen violence spiral in the occupied West Bank.

Israeli losses

Israel's military said on Sunday that 121 soldiers had been killed since the ground campaign began on Oct. 27, when tanks and infantry began to push into Gaza's cities and refugee camps. Netanyahu read out a letter at his weekly cabinet

meeting on Sunday which he said was written by relatives of dead soldiers. The toll is already almost twice as high as during a ground offensive in 2014, a reflection of how far it has pushed into the enclave and of Hamas' effective use of guerrilla tactics and an expanded arsenal. In a talk with an American media outlet on Sunday, the IDF spokesman admitted that Israeli soldiers are tired and suffering from the heavy burden of war, and some of them have been in the battlefield for more than a month and a half. The regime's Agriculture Minister Avi Dichter also said that Israel has paid very high costs in the Gaza war.

The Israeli military said its ground troops had found weapons and a tunnel used by militants to attack troops in Shejaiya, a suburb east of Gaza City in

the north, and destroyed a weapons storage facility in the home of a Hamas operative.

The armed wing of Hamas ally Islamic Jihad said its fighters targeted Israeli forces in Zeitoun neighborhood, in northern Gaza City, with mortar bombs. Fighters also fought Israeli troops in the center of Khan Yunis in the south, residents said, while Israeli tanks shelled the eastern villages of Mughraqa and Juhr Eldeek in the central Gaza Strip, where fighting has intensified with Hamas fighters in the past days.

In Khan Yunis, in southern Gaza, residents reported hearing Israeli planes and tanks bombing and shelling and the sound of rocket grenades, apparently fired by Hamas fighters.

AFP, REUTERS, AP, and IRNA contributed to this report.

Raisi, FM offer condolences to Kuwait over Emir's death



Kuwait's late Emir, Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah. ANADOLU AGENCY

President Ebrahim Raisi and Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian of Iran have extended their condolences to Kuwait on the passing of Emir Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah.

In a message on Saturday, Raisi offered his condolences to the new Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Mishal al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah and the country's government as well as its Muslim nation, Press TV reported.

In another message, Amir-Abdollahian also extended his condolences to the Kuwaiti nation and government on the loss of the Emir. He left Tehran on Sunday for the Persian Gulf country to express solidarity with the government and people of Kuwait on this occasion.

In late November, Sheikh Nawaf was rushed to a hospital for an unspecified illness. State-run news agency KUNA previously reported that he traveled to the United States for unspecified medical checks in March 2021.

Sheikh Nawaf ruled Kuwait from September 29, 2020 to his death, at age 86, on December 16, 2023. He had succeeded to the throne following the death of his half-brother Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah.

Nawaf, who was the crown prince between 2006 and 2020, was the son of the 10th ruler of Kuwait, Sheikh Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, who ruled the country for almost 30 years in the first half of the 20th century. He served in various cabinet positions throughout his life, including leading the ministries of defense, the interior and social services.

UN Security Council condemns terrorist attack in southeast Iran

The members of the UN Security Council have strongly condemned the terrorist attack on a police station in Rask County, Sistan and Baluchestan Province, calling for the prosecution of the perpetrators and sponsors of such "cowardly" acts of terror.

"The members of the Security Council condemned in the strongest terms the cowardly terrorist attack on the Rask police station in Sistan and Baluchestan Province, Iran," read a statement released on Saturday.

At around 2 a.m. local time on Friday, the police headquarters in Rask County was targeted in a terrorist attack, later claimed by the Pakistan-based Jaish ul-Adl terrorist group, Press TV reported. The members of the Security Council underlined the need to hold the "perpetrators, organizers, financiers and sponsors of these reprehensible acts of terrorism accountable and bring them to justice." They also urged all states "to cooperate

actively" with Iran and all relevant authorities, in accordance with their obligations under "international law and relevant Security Council resolutions."

Iran's ambassador and permanent representative to the United Nations, Amir Saeid Iravani, in a post on the X platform expressed appreciation for the Security Council's condemnation of the terrorist attack. Iravani had earlier called on UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres as well as the rotating President of the Security Council José de la Gasca to condemn the terrorist attack. Iranian Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi has called on Pakistan to avert insecurity along the common border. He has paid a visit to the Police headquarters in Rask. Initial reports said eleven police forces were killed and seven more wounded, some in critical condition, in the attack.

"We call on the government of Pakistan to take action to protect and secure

its border and not allow the terrorist groups to create dens on its soil," Tasnim news agency quoted the minister as saying.

The United Nations also denounced the deadly terrorist attack on Friday, emphasizing that all perpetrators must be brought to justice.

"The United Nations strongly condemns the attack today on a police headquarters in Sistan and Baluchestan Province, the Islamic Republic of Iran," Stéphane Dujarric, a spokesman for the UN secretary-general, said in a statement. Meanwhile, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi has ordered swift measures to identify the perpetrators and masterminds of the attack as quickly as possible so that they "can be punished for their disgraceful act."

The attack was one of the deadliest in years for the region, which is close to Iran's border with Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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