

Israeli bombs drop on Rafah as Gazans flee their homes



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Reporter

PERSPECTIVE

Israel has begun launching air strikes in Rafah ahead of a likely invasion of the city, where more than 1.5 million Gazans have taken shelter in camps near the border with Egypt. The air strikes came just hours after the Israeli cabinet told Palestinians to flee the city, a demand that aid groups fear will worsen the already dire humanitarian situation in Gaza, where famine has begun to take hold. The European Union's foreign policy chief called the evacuation order "unacceptable".

The apparent decision to invade Rafah comes as cease-fire talks broke down over the weekend. Israel says the logjam came after an alleged Hamas attack on Israeli soldiers at the Kerem Shalom crossing, while Hamas blamed the breakdown on Israel's decision to start evacuations of Rafah. The possibility of an Israeli assault in Rafah puts US President Joe Biden in a precarious position. The White House has already found itself at odds with many Democrats due to Biden's refusal to break with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his deadly campaign in Gaza. A bloody escalation of the war would further divide his party and ratchet up the pressure to do something to stop Israel's campaign.

Biden may have already internalized that message. On Friday, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that absent a credible plan to protect civilians, "we can't support a major military operation going into Rafah because the damage it would do is beyond what's acceptable."

But the Biden administration has consistently balked at opportunities to hold Israel accountable for alleged war crimes and human rights abuses. Just last week, the White House walked back a threat to restrict weapons transfers to certain Israeli units due to "gross violations of human rights".

A new chance to restrict arms sales could come Wednesday of this week when the Biden administration will issue a mandatory report to Congress evaluating Israel's assurances that it won't use American weapons in ways that violate US and international laws. An independent analysis from legal experts and former State Department officials found numerous attacks that should have already triggered a cutoff in US support. And nearly 90 House Democrats signed a letter last week, calling on the administration to suspend certain weapons transfers to Israel.

A key question is whether a Rafah invasion will further restrict the delivery of US humanitarian aid. Experts say Israel has already violated US law stipulating that Washington will not give weapons to countries that block American aid transfers, and a Rafah invasion would likely lead to further violations.



Smoke rises following an Israeli strike on the densely-populated Rafah, the southern Gaza Strip, on May 6, 2024.
● HATEM KHALED/REUTERS

There is also significant doubt surrounding Israeli assurances that its operation will minimize harm to civilians. Those who are now fleeing Rafah will reportedly have to evacuate to nearby Khan Younis and Al-Mawasi, neither of which has the capacity to

receive incoming displaced people or provide them with much-needed aid. It's unclear how many Gazans will be able to escape before the full-scale assault begins. Israel's previous actions suggest that its tolerance for killing civilians is higher than that of the Biden

administration. The question remains: Is the Biden administration finally ready to publicly break with Israel?

The article first appeared on Responsible Statecraft.

'Where can we go?' say Rafah residents as Israel demands evacuation

AFP – Israel's army said it was instructing Palestinian families in eastern Rafah to flee in preparation for an expected ground assault on the city near Gaza's border with Egypt.

But as many displaced people packed up their things to move yet again, authorities in Hamas-run Gaza said Israeli air strikes were already targeting specific areas ordered evacuated in eastern Rafah.

Residents of Rafah said they emerged after a terrifying night of numerous air strikes on Rafah to find fliers falling from the sky telling them to "evacuate immediately".

"The army is working with intensive power against the terrorist forces near you," read a flier circulated in eastern Rafah.

"For your safety, the IDF (Israeli military) tells you to evacuate immediately towards the expanded humanitarian zone of Al-Mawasi," it said, with a map indicating the location to the north of Rafah. An Israeli military spokesman said the plan was initially for "around 100,000

people" to move. About 1.2 million people are currently sheltering in Rafah, according to the World Health Organisation, most having fled there during the seven-month war between Israel and Hamas Palestinian fighters.

'Very scared'

Rafah resident Ammar Mohammad Abu Assem told AFP that people had also been receiving calls "telling us to evacuate".

He slammed the calls as "foolish talk" after Gaza authorities said strikes on Rafah overnight and Monday morning killed at least 26 people.

"After they bomb, they tell us to evacuate?" he said.

Eyewitnesses described high levels of anxiety and confusion as people began moving from the eastern areas of Rafah, moving their belongings by foot and in overflowing trucks, cars, and donkey-drawn carts.

"We are very scared and afraid because it's not easy to move from one place to

another, from displacement to displacement," said Hanah Saleh, 40, who had already been displaced from Tal Al-Zaatar in northern Gaza to Rafah.

"We do not know where to go," Um Ahmed Fasef told AFP, adding that "this is the third time I have been displaced" since the war began.

Amid pouring rain, some of those sheltering in Rafah said they had begun packing up their things from the densely packed tents and preparing to leave even before Israel's directive arrived. "Whatever happens, my tent is ready," a resident told AFP.

'Where can we go?'

Israel's army has said the area where people are being asked to go had been equipped with field hospitals, tents, and a waterline, while additional food and medical supplies had been stored there.

But aid groups and displaced Gazans warned that the area was already overcrowded, leaving little room for new arrivals.

Osama Al-Kahlout, of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society in Gaza, told AFP that the areas designated for evacuation currently shelter some 250,000 people, many of whom have already been displaced from other areas in the Gaza Strip.

Abdul Rahman Abu Jazar, 36, said he and 12 family members were in the designated evacuation area.

Jazar and his family did not know what to do, he said, because the "humanitarian zone" they were told to head for "does not have enough room for us to make tents because they are (already) full of displaced people".

"Where can we go? We do not know." The Israeli military spokesman told reporters that the evacuation "is part of our plans to dismantle Hamas ... we had a violent reminder of their presence and their operational abilities in Rafah yesterday".

On Sunday, four Israeli soldiers were killed and others wounded, the army said, when a barrage of rockets was fired from an area adjacent to Rafah to-

wards the Kerem Shalom border crossing between Israel and Gaza.

'No credible humanitarian plan'

International aid organisations have voiced alarm at the expected invasion of Rafah.

"From the humanitarian perspective, no credible humanitarian plan for an attack on Rafah exists," said Bushra Khalidi, advocacy director for Oxfam in the Palestinian territories.

Gaza's bloodiest-ever war broke out following Hamas's unprecedented October 7 attack on Israel which resulted in the deaths of more than 1,170 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally of Israeli official figures.

Fighters also seized some 250 captives, with Israel estimating that 128 of them remain in Gaza, including 35 whom the military says are dead.

Israel's retaliatory offensive, aimed at destroying Hamas, has killed at least 34,735 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the Hamas-run territory's health ministry.

