

No aid into Gaza as desperation mounts for millions trapped

October 16, 2023

Online Desk: Israel said Monday there was no temporary truce to allow aid in or foreigners out of the Gaza Strip, as fears grew over the dire humanitarian situation faced by millions of Palestinians trapped in the heavily bombed enclave.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken returned to Israel Monday — ahead of a looming ground offensive to “destroy” the Hamas Islamist group that rules Gaza — and emphasised that “civilians should not have to suffer for Hamas’s atrocities”.

Israel declared war on the Palestinian Islamist group a day after waves of its fighters broke through the heavily fortified border on October 7, shooting, stabbing and burning to death more than 1,400 people, most of them civilians.

Reeling from the deadliest attack in its history, Israel unleashed a relentless bombing campaign of the Gaza Strip that flattened neighbourhoods and killed at least 2,750 people, mainly civilians.

As Israel continued to mass troops along the Gaza border ahead of a major offensive, the Arab League’s chief called for an immediate end to military operations and for safe corridors to allow in aid.

The entire region was “on the verge of the abyss”, warned UN chief Antonio Guterres, as cross-border fires also intensified between Israel and the Lebanese Iran-backed Hezbollah group, which has warned of retaliation if Israeli forces invade Gaza.

In Gaza, scenes of panic, anger and despair were at every corner. Laden with suitcases, plastic bags or even mattresses, inhabitants of northern Gaza were frantically fleeing to the south after Israel’s warning to vacate before its major offensive.

But the arrival of hundreds of thousands of people was putting further pressure on already stretched resources in the densely populated south where there is no escape valve.

“No electricity, no water, no internet. I feel like I’m losing my humanity,” said Mona Abdel Hamid, 55, who fled Gaza City to Rafah in the south of the enclave, where she is staying with strangers.

– Trapped –

Gazans are effectively trapped, with Israeli-controlled crossings closed and Egypt also having shut the Rafah border in the south.

Any departure of Palestinians from Gaza is a sensitive issue, with Arab nations fearing that it could lead to permanent expulsion, something which Blinken has also categorically rejected.

Foreigners have flocked to Rafah in the hopes of being let out, after Blinken said he was confident the crossing “will be open” for aid into the strip.

Reports had suggested that Egypt was blocking the passage of Gazans with foreign passports until relief supplies are allowed in.

But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office dashed hopes of a deal, saying in a statement on Monday that "there is currently no ceasefire and humanitarian aid in Gaza in return for removing foreigners".

Lynn Hastings, the UN humanitarian coordinator for the Palestinian territories, meanwhile decried that Israel was connecting humanitarian aid into Gaza with the release of scores of hostages kidnapped during the Hamas attack.

"Neither should be conditional," she insisted in a video posted by the UN. "They have said they want to destroy Hamas, but their current trajectory is going to destroy Gaza."

– 'No guarantee of control' –

Israel has massed forces outside the long-blockaded enclave of 2.4 million in preparation for what the army has said would be a land, air and sea attack involving a "significant ground operation".

Israel has also bolstered deployment to its northern border with Lebanon, where Hezbollah and Palestinian factions have exchanged fire in the last days with Israeli forces.

Hamas backer Iran has warned that an invasion of Gaza would be met with a response.

"No one can guarantee the control of the situation and the non-expansion of the conflicts" if Israel sends its soldiers into Gaza, said Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian.

Fearful that the skirmishes could escalate into a two-front war in Israel, the United States, which has given unequivocal backing to Israel, has sent two aircraft carriers to the eastern Mediterranean as a deterrent.

On Sunday, a rocket hit the UN peacekeeping base in southern Lebanon, while Hezbollah attacks killed one person in Israel, the Israeli military said.

At least 11 people have been killed in Lebanon and at least two in Israel in the past week. Among those killed in Lebanon was a Reuters journalist, Issam Abdallah.

With tensions intensifying, the Israeli army said it was evacuating residents who live "up to two kilometres from the Lebanese border".

– Escalation risk –

The White House has voiced fears at the prospect of Iran becoming "directly engaged", after Tehran praised the Hamas attack but insisted it was not involved.

US President Joe Biden, asked in an interview on CBS news programme 60 Minutes whether US troops might join the war, said "I don't think that's necessary".

"Israel has one of the finest fighting forces ... I guarantee we're gonna provide them everything they need," he said.

Biden reiterated US backing for Israel in "taking out the extremists", but underlined that any move by Israel to occupy Gaza would be a "big mistake".

The United States, which like several Western governments proscribes Hamas as a terrorist group, has also appealed to China to use its influence in the region to ease tensions.

On Sunday Foreign Minister Wang Yi said Israel's response had "gone beyond the scope of self-defence", and demanded that it "cease its collective punishment of the people of Gaza".

As Israel seeks to avenge the brutal attack during which Hamas militants also took 199 hostages including young children, the Arab League and African Union have warned an invasion could lead to “a genocide”.

– Aid agencies’ alarm –

The UN agency supporting Palestinian refugees said Sunday that one million Palestinians had already been displaced in the first week of the conflict — but the number was likely to be higher.

With around 9,700 injured in the heavy bombardments, hospitals in Gaza were also becoming overwhelmed with increasing numbers of dead and injured.

In southern Gaza, the city of Khan Yunis, usually home to 400,000 people, has more than doubled in population within just days, with terrified families carrying their children and few belongings crowded into every available space, indoors and outdoors.

Israeli energy minister Israel Katz on Sunday said water supplies to southern Gaza had been switched back on, a week after a “complete siege” was announced.

But power outages threaten to cripple life-support systems, from sea water desalination plants to food refrigeration and hospital incubators.

Even everyday functions — from going to the toilet, showering and washing clothes — are almost impossible, locals said.

Foreign governments and aid agencies, including the UN and Red Cross, have repeatedly criticised Israel’s evacuation order as not only is the journey out of the north treacherous, but Israeli air strikes were also continuing in the south of Gaza.

Pointing to a doctor’s house that was targeted, Rafah resident Khamis Abu Hilal said: “All the family was wiped out.”