

Netanyahu vows to invade Rafah ‘with or without a deal’ as cease-fire talks with Hamas continue

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Online Desk: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pledged Tuesday to launch an incursion into the southern Gaza city of Rafah, where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians are sheltering from the 7-month-long war.

Netanyahu said Israel would enter Rafah to destroy Hamas’ battalions there “with or without a deal.” Israel and Hamas are negotiating a cease-fire agreement meant to free hostages and bring some relief to the Palestinians in the besieged enclave.

“The idea that we will stop the war before achieving all of its goals is out of the questions. We will enter Rafah and we will eliminate Hamas’ battalions there — with a deal or without a deal, to achieve the total victory,” Netanyahu said in a meeting with families of hostages held by militants in Gaza, according to a statement from his office.

Netanyahu has vowed to achieve “total victory” in the war and has faced pressure from his nationalist governing partners to launch an offensive in Rafah, which Israel says is Hamas’ last major stronghold.

Hopes have risen in recent days that the sides could move toward a deal that would avert an Israeli incursion into Rafah, where more than half of Gaza’s 2.3 million population are sheltering.

The international community, including Israel’s top ally, the U.S., have raised an alarm over the the fate of civilians in Rafah if Israel invades.

Netanyahu has repeatedly rejected stopping the war in return for hostage releases, and says an offensive on Rafah is crucial to destroying the militants after their Oct. 7 attacks on Israel triggered the conflict. His government could be threatened if he agrees to a deal because hard-line Cabinet members have demanded an attack on Rafah.