

Blinken delivers some of the strongest US public criticism of Israel's conduct of the war in Gaza

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Online Desk: Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Sunday delivered some of the Biden administration's strongest public criticism yet of Israel's conduct of the war in Gaza, saying Israeli tactics have meant "a horrible loss of life of innocent civilians" but failed to neutralize Hamas leaders and fighters and could drive a lasting insurgency.

In a pair of TV interviews, Blinken underscored that the United States believes Israeli forces should "get out of Gaza," but also is waiting to see credible plans from Israel for security and governance in the territory after the war.

Hamas has reemerged in parts of Gaza, Blinken said, and "heavy action" by Israeli forces in the southern city of Rafah risks leaving America's closest Mideast ally "holding the bag on an enduring insurgency."

He said the United States has worked with Arab countries and others for weeks on developing "credible plans for security, for governance, for rebuilding" in Gaza, but "we haven't seen that come from Israel. ... We need to see that, too."

Blinken also said that as Israel pushes deeper in Rafah in the south, a military operation may "have some initial success" but risks "terrible harm" to the population without solving a problem "that both of us want to solve, which is making sure Hamas cannot again govern Gaza." More than a million Palestinians have crowded into Rafah in hopes of refuge as Israel's offensive pushed across Gaza. Israel has said the city also hosts four battalions of Hamas fighters.

Israel's conduct of the war, Blinken said, has put the country "on the trajectory, potentially, to inherit an insurgency with many armed Hamas left or, if it leaves, a vacuum filled by chaos, filled by anarchy, and probably refilled by Hamas. We've been talking to them about a much better way of getting an enduring result, enduring security."

Blinken also echoed, for the first time publicly by a U.S. official, the findings of a new Biden administration report to Congress on Friday that said Israel's use of U.S.-provided weapons in Gaza likely violated international humanitarian law. The report also said wartime conditions prevented American officials from determining that for certain in specific airstrikes.

"When it comes to the use of weapons, concerns about incidents where given the totality of the damage that's been done to children, women, men, it was reasonable to assess that, in certain instances, Israel acted in ways that are not consistent with international humanitarian law," Blinken said. He cited "the horrible loss of life of innocent civilians."

Blinken spoke to Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant on Sunday, reiterating the longstanding U.S. opposition to what is now the growing Israeli offensive in Rafah, given the toll on civilians there, according to the State Department's recounting of the call.

Blinken urged Gallant to allow humanitarian workers to bring aid into Gaza and distribute it. Israel's offensive into Rafah has shut down one of the two main border crossings into the territory for a week, and most operations have stopped at the other one after it was targeted by a Hamas rocket attack.

Seven months of fighting and Israeli restrictions on aid deliveries already have led to famine in the north of Gaza. Aid organizations say the now nearly total cutoff of food, medicine and fuel and the disruption from the Rafah offensive have humanitarian operations across Gaza on the brink of collapse.

Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, in a call Sunday with his Israeli counterpart, Tzachi Hanegbi, raised concerns about a military ground operation in Rafah and discussed "alternative courses of action" that would ensure Hamas is defeated "everywhere in Gaza," according to a White House summary of the conversation. Hanegbi "confirmed that Israel is taking U.S. concerns into account," the White House said.

The war began on Oct. 7 after an attack against Israel by Hamas that killed 1,200 people, mostly civilians. About 250 people were taken hostage. Israel's offensive has killed more than 35,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, according to the health ministry in Gaza.

There are increasing tensions between Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu about how the war has been conducted, and also domestic tensions about U.S. support for Israel, with protests on U.S. college campuses and many Republican lawmakers saying that Biden needs to give Israel whatever it needs. The issue could play a major role in the outcome of November's presidential election.

Biden said in an interview last week with CNN that his administration would not provide weapons that Israel could use for an all-out assault in Rafah.

Blinken appeared on CBS' "Face the Nation" and NBC's "Meet the Press."