

Five Israeli troops killed by friendly fire in Gaza

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Online Desk :

Israel said Thursday that five of its troops were killed by friendly fire in a Gaza battle, as a rift emerged inside the war cabinet on how the Palestinian territory should be ruled in future. More than seven months into the conflict sparked by Hamas's October 7 attack, Israeli forces were fighting Palestinian militants in Gaza's far-southern Rafah and in new flashpoints in northern and central areas of the besieged territory. The army said that the five soldiers were killed when two Israeli tanks mistakenly fired shells at the building they were in during clashes in the northern Jabalia refugee camp on Wednesday.

"Five soldiers of the 202nd Paratrooper Battalion were killed last night in a mass casualty incident as a result of fire by our forces," the military said, adding that seven other troops were wounded. Heavy fighting has flared again in the north following army warnings of "attempts by Hamas to rebuild its military capabilities" months after Israel had declared local militant command structures dismantled. AFP reporters, witnesses and medics said Thursday that Israeli warplanes again targeted areas across Gaza overnight, including in Gaza City and its southern Zeitun area, Jabalia and the Nuseirat refugee camp.

The military's main focus has been Rafah near the Egyptian border, where Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has ordered an offensive in defiance of US warnings that more than a million civilians sheltering there could be caught in the crossfire. Netanyahu on Wednesday argued that "we have to do what we have to do" and insisted that mass evacuations there had averted a much-feared "humanitarian catastrophe". Washington — long Israel's main political, diplomatic and military supporter — has repeatedly urged its ally to take greater steps to protect and aid civilians, and to make a post-war plan for Gaza to avoid being mired in a long counter-insurgency campaign.

– 'Alternative to Hamas' –

The Israeli premier insisted Wednesday that any planning for a post-war Gaza was "empty talk" until Hamas is defeated. In signs of a growing rift, his Defence Minister Yoav Gallant called on Netanyahu "to make a decision and declare that Israel will not establish civilian control over the Gaza Strip". "The 'day after Hamas' will only be achieved with Palestinian entities taking control of Gaza, accompanied by international actors, establishing a governing alternative to Hamas' rule," Gallant said. Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh — whose Islamist group is considered a terrorist organisation by the US, EU and several other governments — insisted that "the Hamas movement is here to stay".

In a televised address Wednesday, he said "it will be the movement and all national (Palestinian) factions who will decide the post-war rule in Gaza". Haniyeh also reiterated the group's demands, which Israel has rejected, in stalled truce talks involving US, Egyptian and Qatari mediators. "Any agreement must ensure a permanent ceasefire, comprehensive withdrawal" of Israeli forces from all parts of the Palestinian territory, a hostage-prisoner exchange, "the return of displaced persons, reconstruction and lifting the siege" of Gaza, Haniyeh said. The Gaza war and the future of the devastated coastal territory will be the focus of a meeting of the 22-member Arab League in Bahrain on Thursday, to be joined by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

The war broke out after the October 7 attack on southern Israel which resulted in the deaths of more than 1,170 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally based on Israeli official figures. The militants also seized about 250 hostages, 128 of whom Israel estimates remain in Gaza, including 36 the military says are dead. Israel's military retaliation has killed at least 35,233 people, mostly civilians, according to the health ministry in Hamas-ruled Gaza. Israel's latest fatalities take to 278 the number of its troops killed in the Gaza

military campaign since the start of the ground offensive on October 27.

– Gaza pier ready –

An Israeli siege on Gaza has brought dire shortages of food as well as clean water, medicines and fuel for its 2.4 million people, and the threat of famine to parts of the war-ravaged territory. The arrival of occasional aid trucks has slowed to a trickle since Israeli forces took control last week of the Gaza side of the Rafah crossing with Egypt, angering Cairo. The US military said Thursday it has completed a temporary pier on Gaza's coast, part of a project to ship in relief goods via the Mediterranean island of Cyprus. "Trucks carrying humanitarian assistance are expected to begin moving ashore in the coming days," it said. "The United Nations will receive the aid and coordinate its distribution into Gaza."

The temporary pier, announced in March by US President Joe Biden, was built at a cost of at least \$320 million. Britain said a ship that left Cyprus on Wednesday was delivering nearly 100 tonnes of aid, including thousands of temporary shelters made up of plastic sheeting. UN agencies and humanitarian aid groups have warned that the so-called maritime corridor, and ongoing airdrops from planes, cannot replace far more efficient truck convoys. Amid the bloodiest ever Gaza war and the surging civilian death toll, Israel has faced a storm of international anger and a global wave of pro-Palestinian demonstrations.

South Africa has accused it of genocide in a case before the International Court of Justice in The Hague. On Thursday Pretoria will ask the court to order an immediate halt to Israel's incursion in Rafah, describing it as an operation that threatens the "very survival of Palestinians". Israel, which will respond on Friday, has highlighted its "unwavering" commitment to upholding international law and described South Africa's case as unfounded and "morally repugnant".