

Israeli military says combat in part of north Gaza is over

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Online Desk :

Israeli forces have ended operations in north Gaza's Jabalia area after days of intense fighting and over 200 airstrikes, while probing further into Rafah in south Gaza, targeting what they say is the last major redoubt of Hamas battalions.

Israeli troops found caches of rocket launchers and other weapons, as well as Hamas tunnel shafts in the centre of Rafah, the military said on Friday, pressing an offensive to break up militant combat units it says are hunkered down in the city on the border with Egypt.

In an update on more than two weeks of fierce fighting in Jabalia, the Israeli military said troops had completed their operation and withdrawn to prepare for other operations in Gaza.

During the operation, troops recovered the bodies of seven of the 250 hostages Hamas-led militants abducted when they stormed over the border into Israel on Oct. 7 last year and killed around 1,200 people, according to Israeli tallies.

Since then, over 36,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's air and land war in Gaza, its Hamas-run health ministry says, and much of the densely populated enclave lies in ruins.

Israel will not agree to any halt in fighting that is not part of a deal that includes the return of surviving hostages, a senior Israeli security official said on Friday. Hamas had said on Thursday that it would be ready for an accord, including an exchange of hostages for Palestinian prisoners held in Israel, as long as the Israelis stopped the war.

In Jabalia, a crowded urban district populated by refugees from the 1948 war of Israel's founding and their descendants, Hamas turned the "civilian area into a fortified combat compound", the Israeli military statement said.

It said Israeli troops killed hundreds of militants in close-quarter combat and seized large caches of weaponry and destroyed rocket launchers primed for use.

Underground, Israel forces disabled a weapons-filled tunnel network extending over 10 km and killed Hamas' district battalion commander, it said.

Israel has blamed what it calls Hamas' deliberate embedding of fighters in residential areas for the high civilian toll in the war. Hamas has denied using civilians as cover for fighters.

Jabalia has been battered by intense combat for weeks, underscoring Israel's difficulty in destroying Hamas units.

There were weeks of heavy fighting in Jabalia in the early stages of the Israeli campaign and in January, the military said it had killed all the Hamas commanders and eliminated the combat formations of Gaza's ruling group in the area.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's vow to eradicate Hamas as a fighting and political force has run up against the Islamist group's deep roots in Gaza's social fabric.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken urged Israel on Wednesday to come up with a post-war plan for Gaza, warning that without one, further military gains might not be durable, and lawlessness, chaos and a Hamas comeback could ensue.

RAFAH FIGHTING

Israeli tanks rumbled into the centre of Rafah on Tuesday as part of a series of probing operations around the area that has become one of the main focal points of the war in Gaza.

The army said it had come across longer-range rockets as well as stocks of rocket-propelled grenades, explosives and ammunition as it continued “intelligence-based operational activities” in Rafah, which skirts Gaza’s border with Egypt.

Hamas fighters demonstrated their continuing strength in Rafah last week, launching missiles at Israel’s commercial hub Tel Aviv for the first time in months on Sunday.

Islamic Jihad, Hamas’ smaller militant ally, said on Friday it fired a barrage of mortar bombs at Israeli soldiers and vehicles penetrating the vicinity of Salah al-Din Gate on Rafah’s southern fringes. It gave no more details.

Rafah, the only major city in Gaza yet to have been taken by Israeli forces, had been a refuge for more than one million Palestinians driven from their homes by fighting in other areas of the small coastal enclave, but most have now left after being told to evacuate ahead of the Israeli operation.

Israel has signalled for weeks that it intended to mount an assault on the remaining Hamas battalions in Rafah, drawing international condemnation and warnings even from allies like the United States not to attack the city while it remained full of displaced people.

The risks were underlined on Sunday when an Israeli airstrike targeting two Hamas commanders outside the city set off a blaze that killed at least 45 people sheltering in tents next to the compound hit by the jets.

As the war has dragged on and Gaza’s infrastructure has been widely demolished, malnutrition has spread among the 2.3 million population as aid deliveries have slowed to a trickle, and the United Nations has warned of incipient famine.