



ISRAEL'S MILITARY ORDERS CIVILIANS TO EVACUATE GAZA CITY, AHEAD OF A FEARED GROUND OFFENSIVE - ASSOCIATED PRESS

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SHURAFU | Associated Press



Photo: Israeli tanks head towards the Gaza Strip border in southern Israel

Israel's military delivered sweeping evacuation orders for almost half of Gaza's 2.3 million people Friday ahead of a feared ground offensive aiming to eradicate the Hamas militant group after its grisly assault into Israel, U.N. officials said. The order sent panic through civilians and aid workers already struggling under Israeli airstrikes and a blockade.

The Israeli military sent one evacuation order directly Friday morning, warning the hundreds of thousands of civilians of Gaza City to flee deeper south into the Gaza Strip, a narrow coastal territory. Israel's directive charged that Hamas militants were hiding in tunnels under the city.

"This evacuation is for your own safety," the Israeli military said, in a warning it said was sent to Gaza City civilians.

The United Nations said it received a separate directive from the Israeli military shortly before midnight, giving all 1.1 million civilians of northern Gaza 24 hours to flee south.

"This is chaos, no one understands what to do," said Inas Hamdan, an officer at the U.N. Palestinian refugee agency in Gaza City, while she grabbed whatever she could throw into her bags as the panicked shouts of her relatives could be heard around her. She said all the U.N. staff in Gaza City and northern Gaza had been told to evacuate south to Rafah.

Nebal Farsakh, a spokesperson for the Palestinian Red Crescent in Gaza City, said there was no way more than one million people could be safely moved that fast.

"Forget about food, forget about electricity, forget about fuel. The only concern now is just if you're make it, if you're going to live," Farsakh said, breaking into heaving sobs.

"What will happen to our patients?" she asked. "We have wounded ~~x~~ we have elderly, we have children who are in hospitals." Farsakh said many of the medics were refusing to evacuate hospitals and abandon patients. Instead, she said, they called their colleagues to say goodbye.

The flurry of directives was taken as signaling an already expected Israeli ground offensive, though the Israeli military has not yet confirmed such a decision. On Thursday it said that while it was preparing, no decision has been made.

The Israeli military did not immediately confirm the broader evacuation order.

The U.N. said the broad evacuation warning it received for all of Gaza's north also applies to all U.N. staff and to the hundreds of thousands who have taken shelter in U.N. schools and other facilities since Israel launched round-the-clock airstrikes Saturday.

"The United Nations considers it impossible for such a movement to take place without devastating humanitarian consequences," U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

"The United Nations strongly appeals for any such order, if confirmed, to be rescinded avoiding what could transform what is already a tragedy into a calamitous situation," Dujarric said.

Another U.N. official said that the United Nation is trying to get clarity from Israeli officials at the senior most political level.

"It's completely unprecedented," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly.

A ground offensive in Gaza, which is ruled by Hamas and where the population is densely packed into a sliver of land only 40 kilometers (25 miles) long, would likely bring even higher casualties on both sides in brutal house-to-house fighting.

Hamas' unprecedented assault last Saturday and smaller attacks since have killed more than 1,300 people in Israel, including 247 soldiers — a toll unseen in Israel for decades — and the ensuing Israeli bombardment has killed more than 1,530 people in Gaza, according to authorities on both sides. Israel says roughly 1,500 Hamas militants were killed inside Israel, and that hundreds of the dead in Gaza are Hamas members. Thousands have been wounded on both sides.

As Israel pounds Gaza from the air, Hamas militants have fired thousands of rockets into Israel. Amid concerns that the fighting could spread in the region, Syrian state media reported that Israeli airstrikes on Thursday put two Syrian international airports out of service.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to "crush" Hamas after the militants stormed into the country's south on Saturday and massacred hundreds of people, including killings of children in their homes and young people at a music festival.

Amid grief and demands for vengeance among the Israeli public, the government is under intense pressure to topple Hamas rather than continuing to try to bottle it up in Gaza.

The number of people forced from their homes by Israel's airstrikes soared 25% in a day, reaching 423,000 out of a population of 2.3 million, the U.N. said Thursday.

On Thursday, the Israeli military pulverized the Gaza Strip with airstrikes, prepared for a possible ground invasion and said its complete siege of the territory — which has left Palestinians desperate for food, fuel and medicine — would remain in place until Hamas militants free some 150 hostages taken during their grisly weekend incursion.

A visit by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, along with shipments of U.S. weapons, offered a powerful green light to Israel to drive ahead with its retaliation in Gaza after Hamas' deadly attack on civilians and soldiers, even as international aid groups warned of a worsening humanitarian crisis. Israel has halted deliveries of basic necessities and electricity to Gaza's 2.3 million people and prevented

entry of supplies from Egypt.



"Not a single electricity switch will be flipped on, not a single faucet will be turned on and not a single fuel truck will enter until the Israeli hostages are returned home," Israeli Energy Minister Israel Katz said on social media.

Lt. Col. Richard Hecht, an Israeli military spokesman, told reporters Thursday that forces "are preparing for a ground maneuver" should political leaders order one.

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Shurafa reported from Gaza City, Gaza Strip and Lederer from Chicago. Associated Press writers Amy Teibel and Isabel DeBre in Jerusalem; Sam McNeil in Be'eri, Israel; Jack Jeffrey and Samy Magdy in Cairo; Samya Kullab in Baghdad and Kareem Chehayeb in Beirut contributed to this report.