

Israeli prime minister vows his forces will invade Rafah



A displaced Palestinian woman who fled her house due to Israeli strikes shelters at the border with Egypt, in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, February 10, 2024 [Mohammed Salem/Reuters]

Tel Aviv, February 11 (RHC)-- Israel is determined to advance with its unspecified plans to invade the city of Rafah in southern Gaza, where millions of displaced Palestinians are sheltering. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reiterated his intention to extend the military operation in an interview broadcast late on Saturday.

"We're going to do it," he declared and said that the plans are being worked on.

The statement comes despite international alarm over the potential for carnage. An estimated 1.4 million Palestinians are crammed into Rafah, and hemmed in by the border with Egypt, after being ordered by the Israeli military to evacuate their homes elsewhere in the Gaza Strip.

The United States, Israel's main backer, has warned against the plan to expand the ground assault into the city, which has for months been subject to almost daily aerial bombardments.

At least 25 Palestinians have been killed in overnight strikes on Rafah, according to Al Jazeera journalists on the ground, as the Israeli army has been ramping up its attacks this week. Over 28,000 Palestinians have now been killed since the start of the war on Gaza on October 7.

Netanyahu said in the interview with U.S. outlet ABC News that he agrees with Washington that civilians need to be evacuated from Rafah before any ground invasion. "We're going to do it while providing safe passage for the civilian population so they can leave," he said, according to published extracts of the interview.

However, it is unclear where such a large number of people, who are pressed up against the border with Egypt and sheltering in makeshift tents, can go. When asked, Netanyahu would only say they are "working out a detailed plan."

"The areas that we've cleared north of Rafah are – there are plenty of areas there," he said.

"Those who say that under no circumstances should we enter Rafah, are basically saying 'lose the war, keep Hamas there'," he said. Reporting from Rafah, Al Jazeera's Tareq Abu Azzoum said desperate Palestinians in the area feel they have no choices left.

"We need to remember that the majority of injured people and displaced people have been transferred to Rafah in order to be away from Israeli operations," he said.

Egypt has fiercely opposed the plan, which threatens to displace hundreds of thousands of Palestinians into its Sinai Peninsula. It is also remaining highly cautious of increased Israeli military activity near its borders. Cairo has warned that its decades-old peace treaty with Israel could face jeopardy if Israel deploys troops on its border.

Israeli Transportation Minister Miri Regev said that the Israeli government takes Egypt's sensitivity regarding the military operation in Rafah seriously and that the two sides will be able to reach an agreement.

Mamoun Abu Nowar, a retired general of the Jordanian air force, told Al Jazeera that Hamas has deep tunnels in the area, some of which run through Egypt. "In order to control these tunnels," he continued, "they have to work very hard, to cut these command posts or destroy them so [Hamas] loses this command as a whole, but this would be a very very difficult fight, it would take months."

International warnings against an invasion of Rafah continue to roll in. The European Union's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, in a post on X late on Saturday, backed warnings by the bloc's member states that an invasion of Rafah "would lead to an unspeakable humanitarian catastrophe and grave tensions with Egypt".

Regional leaders are also sounding the alarm. Jassem Mohamed Albudaiwi, secretary-general of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), said an attack on Rafah would further destabilise the region and harm Palestinians.

UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini said on Sunday that there is a sense of growing anxiety and panic in Rafah.

“A military offensive in the middle of these completely exposed, vulnerable people is a recipe for disaster. I am almost becoming wordless,” he said.

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