

Israel-Hamas war

Israel begins ground combat operations in central Gaza Strip

Hundreds killed in bombardment of camps in recent days, Palestinian officials say



Smoke rises above Bureij refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip following Israeli army shelling © ATEF SAFADI/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

Polina Ivanova in Jerusalem 5 HOURS AGO

Israel has begun ground combat operations in the central area of the Gaza Strip, home to several large refugee camps which have suffered intense shelling over the past week as Israeli forces prepared to move into the area.

Hundreds of Palestinians have been killed in the bombardment of the Bureij and Maghazi camps in recent days, according to Palestinian health officials, an area that had previously been largely spared in [Israel's war against Hamas](#), now in its 82nd day.

“Israel Defense Forces are fighting in the southern Gaza Strip in the area of Khan Younis, and we have expanded the combat to the area known as the Central Camps,” IDF spokesman Daniel Hagari said in a briefing late on Tuesday.

Israel has been focusing its land offensive so far on Gaza City in the north and the southern city of Khan Younis, forcing civilians trapped in the besieged enclave to flee to the increasingly small zones Israel says are safe. The army ordered an evacuation of refugee camps in the 6km-wide central Gaza area, one of the narrowest points of the strip, on Friday.

Videos shared by the Palestinian Red Crescent humanitarian group on Wednesday showed health workers removing bodies from destroyed buildings in the Bureij refugee camp area. A telecommunications blackout was also reported across the enclave.

The death toll in [Gaza](#) has risen to more than 20,900, according to the Palestinian health ministry, since the start of the war on October 7, triggered by a Hamas attack on communities in southern Israel that, according to Israeli officials, killed more than 1,200 people.

Six Palestinians were also killed in an Israeli drone attack on the city of Tulkarm in the occupied West Bank, an official news agency for the Palestinian Authority said on Wednesday, following a raid targeting the Nur Shams refugee camp. Israel claimed to have found weapons as well as an explosives lab in the area, sharing a video of a house being blown up by troops.

US President [Joe Biden](#) met Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the Emir of Qatar, which has with Egypt been leading efforts to broker a ceasefire and hostage deal between the warring sides. More than 100 hostages taken from Israel during the October 7 Hamas attack are still being held in the Gaza Strip.

“The two leaders discussed the urgent effort to secure the release of all remaining hostages held by Hamas, including American citizens,” the White House said in a statement. Discussions also focused on increasing access for humanitarian aid to Gaza.

US national security adviser Jake Sullivan also met Israel’s strategic affairs minister Ron Dermer in Washington on Tuesday.

The UN overnight said it had appointed outgoing Dutch finance minister Sigrid Kaag as its co-ordinator of humanitarian aid for Gaza, a special position created at the UN Security Council last week.

Israel said it would stop automatically issuing visas to UN officials, as relations between Israel and the international body [hit a new low over the war](#). An Israeli government spokesman described the UN as “complicit partners in Hamas’s human shield strategy”.

UN secretary-general António Guterres has previously accused Israel of creating massive obstacles to the entry of humanitarian aid to Gaza, where the UN says the population is facing a “catastrophic” hunger crisis.

Israel said on Wednesday that three more of its troops were killed, bringing the number killed in the close-quarters urban combat of the ground offensive to 164.

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