

Israel-Hamas war

Israeli air strikes hit Rafah hours after Netanyahu ordered evacuation plan

Israeli army says four Hamas battalions are stationed in the densely-populated city



Palestinians search for survivors after an Israeli air strike in Rafah © AP

Polina Ivanova in Jerusalem, **Mai Khaled** in Rafah and **Heba Saleh** in Cairo FEBRUARY 10 2024

Israel has launched several air strikes on Rafah hours after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered the army to prepare a plan to evacuate civilians from the densely populated southern Gazan city.

The overnight attacks killed 28 people, the Palestinian health ministry said, and hit at least two houses in Rafah, the last remaining refuge for more than 1mn Palestinians displaced from their homes by Israel's offensive.

The city on the Egyptian border has been transformed into a [massive tent camp](#) by the war, housing half the population of the Gaza strip.

On Friday, Netanyahu [ordered the military](#) to prepare to expand Israel's offensive to Rafah, describing the move as necessary for the destruction of four Hamas battalions stationed there.

The Israeli leader said he had requested a "combined plan" that would also include the evacuation of the civilian population, with "safe passage to safe zones" ensured. But with much of the rest of Gaza razed, aid agencies questioned what those zones could be and where people could go.

The US and UN have urged Israel not to expand its ground offensive to the area,

warning that any operations there would be a “disaster” and would leave civilians, already squeezed into a tiny sliver of land, with nowhere to flee from the fighting.

Rafah has been hit by multiple air strikes since the start of Israel’s offensive against Hamas in October last year, but Israeli ground forces have not entered the area.

Israel launched its offensive in Gaza after Hamas militants stormed into Israel on October 7, killing 1,200 people and taking another 250 hostage, according to Israeli officials.

The Palestinian health ministry in Gaza said on Saturday that 117 people had been killed across the territory overnight, pushing the total death toll from Israel’s land and air offensive to more than 28,000.

Israel’s military also said it had launched a targeted strike on the Rafah area that eliminated “senior Hamas operative” Ahmed Al-Yaqoubi, as well as another senior Hamas member. It shared a video of the bombing of a car.

A local security figure confirmed that Al-Yaqoubi, a member of Hamas’s internal security force, was killed while driving west of Rafah.

In Khan Younis, a city north of Rafah, fighting reached the gates of the Nasser hospital on Saturday, the Palestinian health ministry said, with a spokesperson describing “heavy gunfire” near the medical complex.

“We fear for the lives of 300 health workers, 450 sick and injured people,” the spokesperson said, adding there were also thousands of displaced people sheltering inside the complex. The Israel Defense Forces have previously accused Hamas of launching rockets from the hospital grounds.

The IDF said its fighter jets hit several targets associated with Hizbollah in Lebanon on Saturday. The Iran-backed group has supported Hamas, and Hizbollah and Israel regularly exchange artillery fire across Israel’s northern border.

