

**Israel-Hamas war**

## **Israel's siege in north Gaza**

### **brings war's 'darkest moment'**



IDF says it is rooting out Hamas militants but rights groups fear strategy is to empty region

**Heba Saleh** in Cairo 6 HOURS AGO

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Stripped to his underwear by Israeli soldiers, university lecturer Mohamed and dozens of other half-naked men were held for 12 terrifying hours in a sand pit just outside the Kamal Adwan hospital in northern Gaza.

Israel had laid siege to the partially functioning medical facility, which was overflowing with war wounded and people seeking refuge from the fighting, for days before tanks burst into the compound on the night of October 24. Mohamed was among scores of men including medical staff and patients rounded up.

“We were surrounded by tanks topped with machine guns that were taking turns shooting above our heads,” said Mohamed, who had sought shelter with his family on the hospital grounds after Israeli soldiers blew up his home. “There were also bulldozers near the pit and every time they moved we imagined they would bury us alive.”

The raid on the hospital, where the Israeli army said it arrested 100 suspected Hamas militants, was part of a fierce military campaign in Gaza's shattered north that UN human rights chief Volker Türk has called the “darkest moment” since the war began more than a year ago.

The northern campaign has killed hundreds of people in besieged areas such as Jabalia, Beit Lahia and Beit Hanoun, according to Palestinian health authorities, while UN officials say the daily bombardment and ground incursions have trapped thousands of civilians.

The renewed fighting has also choked vital food supplies to the targeted areas, where families were already living in starvation conditions because of Israeli restrictions on the entry of aid.

The offensive, one of several in the north over the course of the war, has provoked international condemnation. Türk said Israel's actions could amount to crimes against humanity, while the US has warned of "efforts to starve Palestinians" and made a rare threat that it could suspend military assistance if the situation did not improve.

"There is no safe place," Majda al-Adham, a court official who lives with eight children and her in-laws in Jabalia and decided it was too dangerous to leave despite an Israeli evacuation order.

She is among thousands too scared to leave their wrecked homes because of the shelling and air strikes around them. "Those who left have also been hit and killed where they sought refuge," she said.

The offensive has raised questions about Israel's strategy.

Israel this month killed Yahya Sinwar, Hamas's leader considered the architect of the October 7 2023 attack that killed 1,200 Israelis, and has decimated much of the group's leadership.

More than 43,000 Palestinians have been killed since the war began, according to authorities in the enclave.



Displaced people walk among the ruins in Jabalia, northern Gaza © Avichay Adraee/X/Reuters

Israel said its aim in the north is to root out Hamas fighters and stop them regrouping in the area. Türk has criticised Palestinian militant groups operating among civilians and putting them “in harm’s way”.

But rights groups fear Israel’s aim appears to be to empty northern Gaza as part of the controversial so-called Generals’ Plan, which would turn the region into a closed military zone and treat remaining civilians as military targets. Israel has denied it was implementing any such scheme.

Mohamed’s ordeal finally ended at 7pm after a day among detainees in the pit. The men had been taken out one by one, placed in front of a camera and interrogated by the military and intelligence services, he said.

Some, suspected by the Israelis of being Hamas fighters, were loaded on trucks and taken away, while others, apparently cleared like him, were let go into the night still dressed only in their underwear.

“They gave us water and pointed out a route between the tanks to Gaza City six kilometres away,” Mohamed, who has now moved with his family into a cramped apartment in the city with 70 other displaced people, said. “We walked in fear amid the constant shooting.”



Israel's army said it arrested 100 suspected Hamas militants after its raid on the Kamal Adwan hospital © AFP/Getty Images

Israel arrested almost all the staff of the Kamal Adwan hospital, said its director Hussam Abu Safiya in a video message posted on social media on Tuesday.

“We have zero capabilities, zero medical supplies and zero staff who can perform surgery after the detention of a large number of them,” Abu Safiya, a paediatrician, said.

Israel said that anyone who was deemed not to be a combatant was allowed to return to work.

Abu Safiya added that dozens of people wounded in a massive bombing in nearby Beit Lahia had arrived on Tuesday but there were no surgeons to deal with their injuries.

“I have just seen a child who needs exploratory abdominal surgery to stem internal bleeding, and we also have children with bones sticking out of their flesh who need surgery,” he said.

The director appealed to the international community for a safe corridor to allow access to foreign surgical teams to treat the wounded and called for the provision of ambulances because almost none remained in the north.



Staff and patients at the Kamal Adwan hospital. Israel has arrested almost all the staff at the facility, says its director © Reuters

Some 70,000 people have been displaced to Gaza City from the northern districts which have been targets of the military campaign, the UN said.

The military has issued evacuation orders to civilians, but Palestinians who remained in the north say they have no refuge other than their homes.

Ramy al-Mutaweq, a grocer in Jabalia, said his family has decided it was safer to stay indoors in their building rather than evacuate; hardly anyone walks on the streets.

He can see tanks and soldiers from his window and sometimes dead bodies or injured people who later die if help arrives late because of the shelling.

“I was on my street this morning and I saw three people killed by a tank shell in front of me,” he said. “So I know I can die any minute. Each one of us here in the north is awaiting death.”

There is very little food, he said, and the family diet consists of bread and herbs. Between him and his siblings they have 35 children who he said “now never get to eat their fill, and neither do their parents. All have lost weight”.

Adham, the court official, said her family survived on the few bags of flour and some tinned food they still had. No one went out for fear of quadcopter drones.

“I have to go down to the ground floor to fill a bucket on days when water reaches us and my heart almost stops out of fear,” she said. “I wish they had hit us from the start and spared us all this suffering.”

*Cartography by Cleve Jones*

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