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Palestine

Israel withdraws from Gaza without achieving objectives

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The Israeli military withdrew the majority of its ground forces back to staging areas outside of Gaza on Sunday. The air force, however, continues to strike targets in the coastal strip. Alongside the reorganization of its troops, which may lead to the establishment of a buffer zone wider than the one in existence before the current offensive, the Israeli army also started preparations toward future indictments against it for war crimes.

The withdrawal of the majority of ground forces has allowed divisions to rest soldiers and allow a significant part of the troops to return home for a brief respite from the fighting. The military began withdrawing its forces on Saturday and began preparing a "temporary security strip".

Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri stated the Palestinians would not be bound by any unilateral decisions made by Israel.

"If the occupation unilaterally withdraws, the battle field would decide the response. We're not going to be obligated to anything," he said.

Israeli military commanders assume the Palestinian resistance will not accept the terms of the Egyptian ceasefire initiative and is not ready to surrender, despite the widespread destruction imposed by Israel.

Ynet, an Israeli news portal, quoted a senior military officer saying "What we are doing in the field right now is based on the lack of an agreement; it is possible an understanding will not be reached".

Despite the withdrawal, Israeli troops continue activities in the southern city of Rafah. According to Palestinian reports, Israeli airstrikes and shelling killed 37 people, including 10 members of a single family, on Sunday morning.

Another 10 Palestinians were killed when Israeli troops shelled a UN school in Rafah, where thousands of people were sheltering from the ongoing Israeli offensive. At least 30 were injured in the strike.

UN spokesman Chris Guinness stated the school had been housing thousands of displaced people.

The United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Robert Serry, expressed, in a statement Sunday, dismay "at reports of an Israeli strike in the immediate vicinity of an UNRWA school in Rafah sheltering 3,000 displaced, which caused multiple deaths and injuries."

"The Special Coordinator condemns the loss of innocent civilian lives," said the statement.

"It is simply intolerable that another school has come under fire while designated to provide shelter for civilians fleeing the hostilities. The Special Coordinator repeats the call of the Secretary-General that all parties must respect

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the inviolability of UN premises and protect civilians.”

“The past 48 hours have seen renewed escalation and unbearable further loss of civilian lives, particularly in the Rafah area,” said Serry.

The strikes brought Sunday morning's death toll in Gaza to 50.

In order to face growing international criticism, the Israeli army is putting together a team tasked with shifting blame for civilian deaths on to Hamas.

With a United Nations Human Rights Council probe already in the works to investigate the high civilian casualty rate due to Israel's offensive against Gaza, Israel seeks to prevent a repeat of the "Goldstone Report" that found the army guilty of carrying out war crimes during Israel's 2009 offensive on Gaza.

The military also fears that in the current conditions, senior Israeli officials may be indicted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court at The Hague.

The team established by the Israel military will be headed by Maj.-Gen. Nimrod Sheffer, and it will be assigned with the task of collecting evidence of Hamas using Palestinian civilians as human shields.

The team will also include officials from the military advocate general's office, southern command, the Gaza division and the air force, as well as officials from the foreign and defense ministries.

According to a report in the Hebrew-language daily Israel Hayom, the team is not only charged with preparing Israel's defense before the UNHRC investigative commission, which could potentially lead to formal charges in the ICC, but also with organizing a diplomatic and public relations offensive.

According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Gaza, the total death toll stands at 1,739, with nearly 10,000 injured and a quarter of Gaza's total population of 1.8 million displaced.

Sixty-four Israeli soldiers and three civilians have died since the start of hostilities on July 8.

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