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UN Human Rights Office in Occupied Palestinian Territory

Ramallah

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Khan Younis escalation poses a risk of possible spillover into Rafah

Further intensification of already relentless Israeli airstrikes and ground fighting between Israeli Defence Forces and Palestinian armed groups across Gaza's southern Governorate of Khan Younis in the last few days has exacerbated dangers for civilians. According to the Gaza Ministry of Health, 195 people were killed in Gaza in a 24-hour period between 22 and 23 January. It appears that civilians are once more bearing the brunt of attacks in Khan Younis, with thousands forced to flee to Rafah, the southernmost governorate, which by now is hosting more than 50 per cent of Gaza's population.



Internally Displaced Persons in the vicinity of Al Nasser Complex, Khan Yunis, south of the Gaza Strip, 2 Jan 2024. Media Clinic

On 21 January, Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant reportedly announced the further expansion of operations in Khan Younis, stating that “the mushrooms of smoke will cover the skies of the Gaza Strip until we achieve our goals.” The intensified IDF operations have seriously endangered the civilian population, including for example, those sheltering at hospitals. Reported airstrikes and IDF tank shells struck the vicinity of Al Amal Hospital, which had already been besieged and hit repeatedly, which has resulted in casualties and trapped an estimated 13,000 people sheltering there. Similarly, ground fighting, including shelling, continued in the vicinity of Al Nasser Hospital, exposing those inside to considerable risk. On 22 January, IDF reportedly raided Al Kheir Hospital, detaining its medical staff. The intensification of fighting has also rendered the movement of ambulances extremely difficult, compounded by the ongoing communications blackout that was reinstituted on 22 January.

Meanwhile, the IDF continues to shell areas that it has unilaterally designated as “safe” for evacuation, reinforcing that **nowhere in Gaza is safe**. For example, IDF indicated Al Mawasi in western Khan Younis as a safe zone in October 2023 but has nevertheless continued to strike the area, resulting in deaths and injuries. On 22 January, an explosion was reported at Al Mawasi School, killing 10 Palestinians. Another strike around midnight on 23 January reportedly hit tents of internally displaced people in Al Mawasi. Despite this, on 23 January, the IDF again urged the residents of certain areas of Khan Younis to move to what they continued to call the “humanitarian area” in Al Mawasi,¹ in western Khan Younis.

¹ <https://twitter.com/AvichayAdraee/status/1749716786818281575>

The intensification of the operation in Khan Younis raises serious concerns that Palestinians are being forced to leave their homes and shelters, including those who had previously been displaced from northern Gaza to Khan Younis. In light of the mass displacement and ongoing military operations, as well as continuing restrictions imposed by Israel on essential life-saving humanitarian assistance from entering Gaza, humanitarian operations have been overwhelmed. Hundreds of thousands of displaced people are now filling the streets of Khan Younis and Rafah and are living in makeshift shelters in miserable conditions, with little or no access to food, water, medicines and appropriate shelter, and many are facing the risk of further displacement.

The intensification of the operations also raises grave alarm of further escalation of the hostilities in Rafah - which could have serious implications for over 1.3 million people who are reportedly sheltering in the governorate with the attendant risk that people who are essentially trapped in smaller and smaller areas may be forced out of Gaza.

The UN Human Rights Office calls for an immediate ceasefire.

ENDS

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