



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on February 15, 2024

Israel Vows Action Against Hamas in Rafah Amid Global Calls for Restraint

Israel will proceed with an offensive against Hamas in Rafah, the last refuge for displaced Palestinians in southern Gaza, after allowing civilians to vacate the area, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on February 14.

His remarks came after talks in Cairo on a possible ceasefire and the handing over of hostages held by Hamas on February 13 were left hanging, sparking concerns among the displaced Palestinians that Israel would soon invade Rafah, which abuts Egypt.

"We will fight until complete victory and this includes a powerful action in Rafah as well, after we allow the civilian population to leave the battle zones," Netanyahu declared on his Telegram account.

Previously, Netanyahu's office said Hamas had suggested no new offer for a hostage deal in the Cairo talks and that Israel would not accept the militant group's "ludicrous demands." "A change in Hamas' positions will make it possible to move forward in the negotiations," it said.

Relatives of Israeli hostages held by Hamas said they would barricade the Israeli defense headquarters on February 14 to protest what they said was a scandalous move by Israel to not send negotiators to the next session of the Cairo talks. The move "amounts to a death sentence" for the 134 hostages in Hamas' tunnels, the group said, in a mark of growing domestic dissent in Israel after four months of the Gaza war.

Although the Israeli military says it wants to eradicate Islamist militants from hideouts in Rafah and liberate hostages being held there after the Hamas rampage in Israel on October 7, it has provided no details of a proposed plan to evacuate civilians.

Said Jaber, a Gaza businessman who is sheltering in Rafah with his family, told Reuters that "We are now counting down the days before Israel sends in tanks. We hope they don't but who can prevent them?"

At dusk on February 14, over 2,000 Palestinians who had been sheltering in Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis in southern Gaza arrived in Rafah after being told to evacuate by the Israeli army, residents and some witnesses said.

Richard Peeperkorn, the World Health Organization representative for Gaza and the West Bank, said an attack on Rafah would be "an unfathomable catastrophe ... and would even further expand the humanitarian disaster beyond imagination."

French President Emmanuel Macron raised similar concerns in a phone call on February 14 with



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Netanyahu, the president's office said, saying further forced displacements of people could also increase regional tensions.

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said before talks with Netanyahu that people in Rafah with nowhere to go "cannot simply vanish into thin air."

For its part, Israel said it takes steps to minimize civilian casualties and slammed Hamas fighters of hiding among civilians, including in hospitals and shelters — something the militant group denies.

On February 14, Israel said it had approved the use of Starlink — the satellite network of billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk — to help communications at a field hospital in Gaza and in Israel itself for the first time.

Israeli forces shelled eastern areas of Rafah overnight, and pounded several areas of Khan Younis in southern Gaza, residents said.

The health ministry in the Hamas-governed enclave said Israeli forces were still isolating the two main hospitals in Khan Younis, and that sniper fire at Nasser Hospital had killed and wounded many people in recent days.

An Israeli airstrike on a house in Al-Nusseirat refugee camp in central Gaza killed six people, health officials said. At least 28,576 Palestinians have been killed, including 103 in the past 24 hours, and 68,291 wounded in Israeli strikes on Gaza since October 7, based on the health ministry in Gaza.

Many other people are believed to be buried under the rubble of destroyed buildings across the densely populated Gaza Strip, much of which is in ruins. Supplies of food, water, and other essentials are running out, and disease is spreading.

At least 1,200 Israelis were killed and around 250 were taken hostage in the Hamas raid on southern Israel on Oct. 7, according to Israeli tallies.

Israel has vowed to fight on until it eradicates Hamas and has made the return of the last hostages a priority. Hamas says Israel must commit to ending the war and withdrawing from Gaza.

Israel also said on February 14 that it has begun a "series of strikes" in Lebanon, in a move that will likely stoke fears of a major military confrontation between the neighbors. The Israeli military did not immediately offer further details of the airstrikes, which came hours after at least one person was killed and seven were injured in a rocket attack launched from Lebanon.

Footage circulating on social media seems to show areas in the southern Lebanon devastated by the strikes, including in Nabatieh Governorate — deeper into Lebanese territory than many previous attacks.

Hezbollah, the Lebanese militant group that has had near-daily exchanges of fire with Israeli forces since the onset of the war in Gaza four months ago, did not immediately claim responsibility for the rocket attacks earlier on February 14.

On February 13, Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah said rockets fired from Lebanese territory would end "when the attack on Gaza stops and there is a ceasefire" between its Palestinian allies and Israel. "If they [Israel] broaden the confrontation, we will do the same," Nasrallah declared in a televised statement.

The recent airstrikes in Lebanon come amid warnings from global leaders of an expanded conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. Over the past several months, tens of thousands of people have been



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evacuated from both sides of the Israel-Lebanon frontier due to waves of cross-border fire.

At least 243 people, mostly Hezbollah fighters but also 30 civilians, have been killed by Israeli strikes in Lebanon since the Hamas attack on October 7 that inflamed regional tensions, the AFP said. Nine Israeli soldiers and six civilians have also been killed, according to official figures. Based on Lebanese media outlet Al-Mayadeen, a mother and her two children were killed by the airstrikes in the town of Souaneh.

Hezbollah, which is supported by Iran, is generally considered to be a stronger fighting force than Hamas, while also being one of the most influential political factions in Lebanon. As per the group's leadership, Hezbollah has about 100,000 fighters within its ranks — a figure that exceeds Lebanon's official state military.

Meanwhile, the leaders of Ireland and Spain told European Commission [EC] President Ursula von der Leyen and EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell in a letter on February 14 that the EC must urgently reconsider whether Israel is abiding by its human rights obligations in Gaza under the EU/Israel Association Agreement, an economic pact that forms the groundwork of relations between Brussels and West Jerusalem.

"We are deeply concerned at the deteriorating situation in Israel and in Gaza, especially the impact the ongoing conflict is having on innocent Palestinians, especially children and women," Irish Taoiseach Leo Varadkar and Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez wrote.

The prime ministers pointed out that while it is at heart a free-trade agreement, the EU/Israel Association Agreement also "makes respect for human rights and democratic principles an essential element of the relationship." If Brussels finds those principles have been violated, it could propose "appropriate measures to the council to consider," the letter stated, and to prevent further irreversible harm to the people of Gaza, an imminent humanitarian ceasefire is urgently necessary.

"The implementation of the two-state solution is the only way to make sure this cycle of violence does not repeat itself," they continued, insisting the EU had "a responsibility to take action to make this a reality."

Reiterating a denunciation of Hamas' raid and a call for the release of hostages being held in Gaza, Sanchez and Varadkar stated that Israel's right to self-defense "can only be exercised in line with international law... [and] must comply with the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution."

"The expanded Israeli military operation in the Rafah area poses a grave and imminent threat that the international community must urgently confront," they wrote, referring to the planned ground assault that has been widely condemned even by West Jerusalem's allies, including leaders in the United States and Europe.



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