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US-backed Israeli invasion of Gaza unleashes death and destruction

By Bill Van Auken

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The death, destruction and human suffering caused by Israel's 11-day-old onslaught against the impoverished and densely populated Gaza Strip increased sharply Friday. Israeli troops and armored columns continued pushing into the territory in an invasion launched the night before, even as the bombardment from air, land and sea intensified.

The death toll rose rapidly to the 300 mark on Friday, while the number of wounded climbed to well over 2,200. What is unfolding in Gaza is a calculated and savage war crime against a largely defenseless population carried out with the full and open support of Washington and the complicity of the European Union, the Arab regimes and the Palestinian Authority (PA) of President Mahmoud Abbas.

It is no exaggeration to compare the lethal terror and collective punishment being meted out by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in Gaza with the methods employed by the Nazis in the Warsaw Ghetto. Massive firepower is being unleashed on a narrow strip of land bound on two sides by Israel and its invading armies, on a third by the sealed Egyptian border, and on the fourth by a

sea filled with Israeli gunboats. Its total land mass is roughly equivalent to that of the US city of Philadelphia, while its population is some 20 percent greater.

In an act of psychological terror, Israel dropped leaflets ordering over 100,000 Palestinians in the border areas to flee their homes. The reality, however, is that there is nowhere to hide from the assault. Those remaining in their homes are designated as “terrorists” or “human shields,” who can be killed without compunction.

Medics in the town of Beit Hanoun, on the northeast edge of Gaza, reported Friday night that an entire family of eight was wiped out when a tank shell demolished their home, leaving their bodies in the rubble. Emergency services spokesman Ashraf al-Qudra identified the victims as the Abu Jurad family, consisting of two men, two women, and four children. The children’s names were Hania, Ahlam, Samih and Musa—two girls and two boys. One of them was a five-month-old baby.

United Nations officials in Gaza reported Friday that the number of internally displaced Gazans seeking shelter at UN facilities had doubled to more than 40,000. But food is running out at these facilities, even as electric power and water supplies have been cut off for the overwhelming majority of the population.

In clear-cut crime against humanity, Gaza hospitals, which have been overwhelmed by the influx of wounded even as they run out of the most basic supplies, have themselves been repeatedly targeted for shelling and air strikes since the initiation of the Israeli ground invasion.

The Al-Quds hospital was struck overnight, according to the Ma’an News Agency. The bombardment ignited a fire that damaged several of the hospital’s departments. Shells also fell on the Beit Hanoun Hospital, damaging its top floors and panicking patients and staff. Tank shells also struck the al-Wafa Hospital in Gaza City.

“Israeli tanks are shelling the hospital, they have hit several of the floors, and several nurses have been injured,” the facility’s director, Basman Alashi, told the AFP news agency. “There is no place safe in Gaza,” he added. “If a hospital is not safe, where is?”

A report from the Nasser Hospital in the southern Gazan city of Khan Yunis by AFP provides a sense of the horrific human toll being inflicted by the Israeli aggression. Of those who arrived at the hospital Thursday night, it said, many were children, and at least 11 died.

Among the patients was 25-year-old Khadija Abu Hama, who was grievously wounded when tanks shelled her neighborhood. “Shrapnel ripped through most of her body, embedding itself in her brain, breaking her left arm and gouging out her left eye,” according to the report. “Next to her was 18-year-old Uday al-Astal, now paralyzed on his right side after shrapnel entered his

brain.” He was wounded in a bombing that killed four of his relatives, including two children, ages four and six. A relative in the same intensive care ward had his leg amputated.

Dr. Moataz al-Jubur, who is in charge of the ward, told the AFP: “The whole world is watching while the Palestinians are being slaughtered. They are innocent people, people sitting next to their homes, people sitting with their relatives. Where should these people go?”

According to health officials, at least 63 Palestinians were killed in Gaza on Friday. During the same period, one Israeli soldier died, apparently the victim of “friendly fire” from an Israeli tank.

There are reports that Israel, which has called up another 18,000 reservists, bringing the total number of troops mobilized for the war on Gaza to 65,000, has also been using internationally banned weapons such as fletchette bombs, an anti-personnel weapon that saturates an area with lethal darts, as well as poison gas.

In the midst of this slaughter, President Barack Obama Friday morning spoke to Netanyahu, offering the Israeli regime unqualified US support for the bloody operation in Gaza. Speaking to White House reporters afterwards, Obama said he had “reaffirmed my strong support for Israel’s right to defend itself.” He continued: “No nation should accept rockets being fired into its borders.”

This, as missiles, bombs and shells rained down upon Gaza.

Obama then declared, “... we support military efforts by the Israelis to make sure that rockets are not being fired into their territory. We also have said that our understanding is the current military ground operations are designed to deal with the tunnels, and we are hopeful that Israel will continue to approach this process in a way that minimizes civilian casualties.”

If the situation were not so tragic, Obama’s remarks would be almost comical. The idea that this massive military undertaking is being carried out to stop rockets that have in the space of 11 days killed one single Israeli, or that the IDF is confining itself to destroying tunnels, is ludicrous. The suggestion that Israel is acting to minimize civilian casualties, who make up 80 percent of those killed, with fully a quarter of these being children, is obscene.

Similarly, Secretary of State John Kerry reiterated Israel’s “right to defend itself,” while urging a cease-fire “as soon as possible,” a phrase that Tel Aviv correctly understood as a US green light to wage war on the people of Gaza as it sees fit.

The assault on Gaza was prepared long before a single rocket was fired from the territory. It was a response in the first instance to Hamas’s acceptance of a “national consensus” government with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, joining the two separated territories of Gaza and the West Bank under a single entity. Hamas held no posts in this administration and for the

first time in eight years restored at least some authority in Gaza to the PA, a body that has been totally subservient to Israel and the US. Nevertheless, Tel Aviv was determined to maintain the separation between the two territories, even as Washington recognized the new government.

The Netanyahu government set about to wreck the unity agreement, tightening the blockade of Gaza and preventing the payment of salaries to its 43,000 public employees. At the same time, it seized upon the abduction of three settler youth in the West Bank, who were later found dead, as a pretext for a crackdown on Hamas's members in the occupied territory, arresting some 600 people and launching a wave of repression in which at least 10 Palestinians were killed. It was this violent campaign of collective punishment that provoked the first rockets fired from Gaza.

More fundamentally, war is the mode of existence of the Zionist state, which continuously provokes armed confrontations as a means of diverting outward the immense contradictions that have built up in one of most socially polarized societies in the world.

The Obama administration, like previous administrations going back more than half a century, supports Israeli militarism as a means of advancing US imperialism's own aims of asserting hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East.

Giving the lie to Obama's rhetoric about Israel confining its operations to destroying tunnels, Netanyahu Friday signaled that Israel is preparing to escalate the Gaza bloodbath still further. "My instructions... to the Israeli army, with the approval of the security cabinet, is to prepare for the possibility of a widening, a significant widening of the ground operation," he told reporters at the Tel Aviv military headquarters Friday.

Significant elements within his own government, including Israel's fascistic foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, have demanded that the IDF reimpose control over all of Gaza and kill, capture or expel all Hamas members—war aims that entail the murder of tens of thousands of Palestinians.