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## ***Biden reaffirms US support for Israel as Netanyahu pledges to proceed with assault on Rafah***



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, center, with commanders and soldiers in the northern Gaza Strip, on Monday, Dec. 25, 2023. Netanyahu has said Israel will continue with the offensive until a "final victory" achieves all of its goals. [AP Photo/Avi Ohayon/GPO]

Israel is determined to assault Rafah, the southernmost city in Gaza where over a million people are sheltering, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared on Sunday.

In an interview with ABC, Netanyahu said, "We're going to do it. We're going to get the remaining Hamas terrorist battalions in Rafah."

The assault on Rafah would lead to massive loss of life among civilians. Israel's genocide in Gaza has so far killed 35,000 people, according to the Euro-med monitor, of whom over 30,000 are civilians. More than 85 percent of the population of Gaza has been made homeless, while one in 10 children under five are suffering from acute malnutrition.

Notably, Netanyahu positively asserted that the population of Gaza would be forced to the north, amid widespread warnings by human rights experts that Israel's real plan is to force the population of Gaza over the border into Egypt to the southwest.

"There's plenty of room north of Rafah for them to go to, and that's where we're going to direct them," Netanyahu said. "And again, urge them and direct them to do so with flyers, cell phones, and safe corridors."

"Our goal," Netanyahu declared, "is total victory."

Following Netanyahu's appearances on ABC and Fox News on Sunday, the White House released the readout of a call between US President Joe Biden and Netanyahu, where the American president reaffirmed his support for Israel's military actions, declaring, in language that echoed Netanyahu's, that Biden "reaffirmed our shared goal to see Hamas defeated and to ensure the long-term security of Israel and its people."

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Biden, according to the readout, "reaffirmed his view that a military operation in Rafah should not proceed without a credible and executable plan for ensuring the safety of and support for the more than one million people sheltering there."

Given Netanyahu's assurances that the Israeli military had developed a "plan" to disperse those sheltering in Rafah into northern Gaza, the implication of Biden's remarks was to green light the planned attack.

Mustafa Barghouti, a Palestinian politician and member of the Palestinian National Initiative, responded to Biden's statement by telling Al Jazeera that "Biden gave Netanyahu the green light to invade Rafah." He added, "The US is a participant in this attack."

Last week, Biden had said that Netanyahu's actions were "over the top," while US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield declared that "under the current circumstances in Rafah, a military operation now in that area cannot proceed."

Now, in Biden's remarks, this language was amended to assert that the attack "should not proceed without a credible and executable plan."

In an article based on sources inside the White House, the *Washington Post* reported, “For now, the White House has rejected calls to withhold military aid to Israel or impose conditions on it, saying that would only embolden Israel’s enemies.” It added, “White House aides say publicly that there has been no change in Biden’s strategy or message.”

Critically, Biden’s statement was accompanied by a vote in the Democratic-led Senate 67-27 in favor of a funding bill including \$14 billion for funding for Israel’s onslaught on Gaza.

Over the weekend, Israeli forces continued a non-stop aerial bombardment of Rafah. On Sunday, Al Jazeera reported that airstrikes killed 11 people in Rafah, amid reports of heavy shelling near Kuwait Hospital. This was in addition to 42 Palestinians killed in bombardments on Saturday.

On both Saturday and Sunday, over 100 people were killed in Gaza, bringing the official death toll to 28,176—a figure that swells to over 35,000 once those missing are added.

On Saturday, Israeli forces killed two ambulance workers who were attempting to rescue Hind Rajab, a six-year-old girl killed by Israeli forces. The Palestine Red Crescent Society condemned the murders. It said in a statement on X, “According to international humanitarian law and the Geneva Conventions, the direct targeting and deliberate killing of PRCS crews and volunteers is considered a war crime.” It added, “The contracting parties that signed the Geneva Conventions and are obligated to enforce respect for international humanitarian law must take the necessary measures to suppress, rebuke, and punish the perpetrators.”

In another incident, Al Jazeera published video footage showing an Israeli sniper killing a young woman and her young cousin.

Francesca Albanese, the United Nations rapporteur on Palestine, asserted that Israel is operating in open defiance of a ruling by the International Court of Justice ordering Israel to cease its genocide in Gaza. “Israel is obligated to adhere to the court’s order, and states must act decisively to prevent further atrocities,” she said.

In a statement Sunday, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization, warned that the planned assault on Rafah would lead to a humanitarian disaster. “Proceeding with the plans could have gravely devastating consequences for the 1.4 million people who have nowhere else left to go, and who have almost no place left to seek healthcare.” He added that hospitals in the Gaza Strip are “overwhelmed and overflowing,” while, “In the rest of the Strip, a majority of hospitals are either minimally- or non-functional.”

In a statement on X, Catherine Russell, the executive director of UNICEF, said that “Rafah is one of the most densely populated places on earth, teeming with children and families, some already displaced many times by war in Gaza.” She added, “Some 1.3 million civilians are pushed into a corner, living on streets or shelters. They must be protected. They have nowhere safe to go.”

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