

Israel says Gaza incursion to go on

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Israel's defense minister says the Gaza operation will go on for "as long as necessary", snubbing international calls for an end to the onslaught.

"The operation will go on and be intensified as long as necessary," Defense Minister Ehud Barak said at a televised news conference on Saturday.

He made the remarks after waves of Israeli aircraft swooped over the Gaza Strip, killing more than 210 Palestinians. The center of Gaza City became a scene of chaotic horror, where dozens of mutilated bodies were laid out on the pavement, the New York Times reported.

The death toll is expected to rise because of the ongoing Israeli raids.

"There is a time for cease-fires and a time to fight, and now is the time to fight," Barak said. "For months the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) and security forces have been preparing for the operation that began today."

Gaza residents told Press TV that the Israeli gunboats have approached the coastal strip and the helicopters are still seen flying over the coastal region.

Tel Aviv had long threatened the Hamas movement with a military offensive, warning that the punitive measures against the populated area would be aimed at halting Palestinian rocket attacks on Israel.

The Saturday onslaught came after a six-month truce between Israel and the Hamas movement expired on December 19.

"Hamas was warned a few times in a variety of ways, but I can't elaborate on the warnings," said Maj. Avital Leibovich, a spokeswoman for the Israeli military.

"Anything associated with Hamas is for us a legitimate target, including an apartment in which the basement is a weapons storehouse. This operation is not finished yet, but for now it involves only aircraft," she added.

Israel placed the Gaza Strip under a blockade after the democratically-elected Palestinian government of Hamas took control of the coastal area in mid-June 2007.

Palestinian groups say they would consider a longer ceasefire if Israel met Hamas demands, cease all military attacks on Gaza, and lifts the embargo on the strip.

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