

Reports reveal devastation wreaked by Israeli military in Gaza

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With the ceasefire in Gaza now in effect, for the time being at least, many international journalists are now able to enter the Palestinian territory for the first time since the Israeli military offensive began last month. Initial reports have highlighted the utter destruction inflicted upon the population by Israel's armed forces. At least 5,000 homes have been destroyed and more than 20,000 damaged, with many urban centers reduced to nothing more than rubble. Gaza's limited social infrastructure has been largely obliterated, as have numerous factories and agricultural centers.

The picture emerging from Gaza puts paid to the Israeli government's lies that its military assault was a defensive response to Hamas rockets, and that those leading "Operation Cast Lead" were taking great care to avoid civilian casualties. The offensive was in fact a war crime—an act of collective punishment aimed at demoralizing and intimidating the Palestinian population, thereby suppressing all resistance to the ongoing Israeli occupation. The Zionist state also no doubt intended to send a warning to Iran, Syria, Lebanon and other potential opponents of its expansionist strategy.

Journalists in Gaza struggled to find appropriate metaphors or historical precedents to describe the devastation. From Gaza City, Reuters' Douglas Hamilton wrote: "The destruction is total, as if a terrible earthquake had struck. But this was no natural disaster... [D]rive up into the suburb that once sat proudly on the ridge, and it's as if one had turned a corner of Stalingrad, a dark scene from some World War Two battle of annihilation."

Associated Press: "Destruction in some areas left streets that resembled a moonscape."

The Financial Times spoke with Jaber Wishah, deputy director of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights. "This reminds us of the film *The Day After*," he said, referring to a film about a nuclear catastrophe. "People are in complete shock."

Buildings and sites associated with any form of Palestinian autonomy were among those targeted. The parliament and cabinet buildings in Gaza City were destroyed, as was the city's police headquarters, the Bank of Palestine building, the main university, and several mosques. Israeli shells and tanks ruined acres of olive and fruit groves. Major shopping centers and markets were hit. Many of the small number of factories previously able to operate in Gaza were also targeted. "Gaza's only cement packing factory is now a giant scrap heap, its towering silo tilting precariously," Associated Press reported. "The owner's villa, pounded by Israeli tank shells, looks like Swiss cheese."

Residential areas, including a large number of apartment buildings, were badly damaged and in many cases entirely destroyed by mortars and bombs. The UN has reported that more than 50,000 Palestinians are homeless and are crowding into 50 emergency shelters.

The exact number of people made homeless by the Israeli assault is likely to increase as the full scale of the damage becomes better known. According to an initial estimate issued by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, the structural damage will cost at least \$1.9 billion.

Reuters reported: "Municipal bulldozers pushed aside crushed cars and fallen chunks of concrete from the streets, but nothing could conceal the scale of destruction wrought by Israel's military machine. 'Some people can't even recognize the place where their house used to be,' one policeman radioed to his commander from the northern town of Beit Lahiya."

Several journalists reported on the racist graffiti left by Israeli troops on the walls of bombed-out apartment buildings and mosques. " Hamas whores " in Hebrew and " Hamas is dead " in English was sprayed onto one mosque in Gaza City's Zeitoun suburb. The Guardian reported that a nearby home had slogans including, " Arabs need to die " and " Arabs: 1948 to 2009. " Such taunts are evidence of the fascistic sentiments being cultivated within the Israeli Defense Forces.

The humanitarian crisis now confronting the Palestinian people has been made worse by Israel's targeting of Gaza's water and electricity networks. People in Gaza City have reportedly been forced to light fires and cook in pots on the side of rubble-littered roads.

Even before the war, water and power infrastructure had already been damaged by the Israeli siege, with the main power station operating only intermittently and fuel shortages affecting water pumps. The military assault saw six major water wells damaged or destroyed, disrupting water supplies to an additional 200,000 of Gaza's 1.4 million people, according to a senior water authority official cited by the Washington Post. The UN has reported that 400,000 Gazans now have no access to running water. In Gaza City, 80 percent of the electricity grid was damaged, including power lines. Palestinian technicians said that restoring water and electricity services would take weeks, but only if Israel permits the entry of necessary spare parts and equipment.

The terrible casualties inflicted on the Palestinian population underscores the barbarism of the Israeli military assault. At least 1,300 people were killed, including hundreds of children. The toll is likely to rise, as many families are still discovering decomposing bodies beneath the rubble of what were their homes and businesses.

An estimated 5,300 people were wounded, many seriously. Medical personnel in Gaza have reported an unusually high proportion of limb amputations. Dr. Jan Brommundt, a German doctor working for Medecins du Monde in the south Gazan city of Khan Younis, told Al Jazeera that the injuries he had seen were "absolutely gruesome." He said surgeons had reported many cases where casualties had lost both legs rather than one, raising suspicions that the Israeli military was using Dense Inert Metal Explosives (DIME), an experimental explosive device that expels charged tungsten dust that acts as micro-shrapnel, burning and destroying everything within a four-meter radius.

"Victims will present within one to five hours with an acute abdomen which looks like appendicitis, but it turns out on operation that dozens of miniature particles can be found in all of their organs," Dr. Brommundt explained. "It seems to be some sort of explosive or shell that disperses tiny particles at around 1x1 or 2x1 millimeters that penetrate all organs. These miniature injuries, you are not able to attack them surgically."

Another doctor corroborated these reports. Dr. Erik Fosse, a Norwegian surgeon who worked at the Al-Shifa hospital in northern Gaza during the Israeli attack, told Al Jazeera that there was a significant increase in double amputations. “We suspect they used Dime weapons because we saw cases of huge amputations or flesh torn off the lower parts of the body,” he said. “The pressure wave [from a Dime device] moves from the ground upwards and that’s why the majority of patients have huge injuries to the lower part of the body and abdomen...The problem is that most of the patients I saw were children. If they [the Israelis] are trying to be accurate, it seems obvious these weapons were aimed at children.”

Reports continue to emerge of Israeli war crimes committed during its offensive. Amnesty International yesterday said the deployment of white phosphorus munitions in densely populated areas of Gaza was indiscriminate and illegal. The Israeli military has claimed it was using phosphorous for illumination purposes, but Amnesty found evidence that the incendiary and corrosive substance had been used as a chemical weapon.

There have also been reports of the Israeli army firing bullets and shells tipped with depleted uranium. Arab ambassadors yesterday delivered a letter to the International Atomic Energy Agency asking Director General Mohamed ElBaradei to “carry out a radiological and physical assessment in order to verify the presence of depleted uranium in the weaponry used by Israel in the Gaza Strip.”

According to Israeli officials, ground forces are expected to be withdrawn from Gaza by the time Barack Obama is inaugurated as US president. These cynical political calculations point to the fragility of the ceasefire. There are already voices within the Israeli political and military establishment warning that renewed military action is only a matter of time. Opposition Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu said on Sunday that the military “has dealt Hamas a severe blow, but unfortunately the job has not been completed.”

There remains the danger that the firing of rockets from Gaza will provide the pretext for Israel to launch a broader regional offensive, potentially involving an attack on Iran. Both the Jerusalem Post and Haaretz have published reports today claiming that Tehran plans to smuggle long-range missiles into the Palestinian territories. Neither article included any supporting evidence for this claim, and instead cited “intelligence reports,” indicating that the stories were Israeli intelligence-military plants.

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