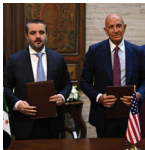




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UN panel accuses Israel of genocide as Gaza attack intensifies

Blocked roads and extortionate
transport costs leave Palestinians
unable to flee worsening violence

NAGHAM MOHANNA

Israeli troops pushed deeper into Gaza city yesterday as the country's government brushed aside UN accusations of genocide.

The Israeli army said it had begun "expanded ground operations" in Gaza city after weeks of heavy bombardment that destroyed high-rise buildings and forced thousands of people to leave the area.

"Gaza is burning," said Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz, as Palestinians fleeing the violence faced blocked roads and extortionate transport costs.

A UN-commissioned report into war crimes allegations in Gaza was published yesterday, and said that Israel's assault on Gaza fulfils four of the five conditions for a genocide under the Genocide Convention.

Israeli troops use "heavy unguided munitions" in the enclave, in an operation "intended to kill as many Palestinians as possible", the report read.

The report also accused Israel of inflicting harm on survivors, forcing Palestinians to live in lethal conditions and preventing children from being born in the territory.

Israel has "intentionally created an atmosphere of panic and terror and instilled extreme fear" in Gaza's population, read the report, while a "constant fear and feeling of helplessness" prevents Palestinians from leading normal lives.

The Israeli Foreign Ministry dismissed the findings of the investigation as a "fake report" that "relies entirely on Hamas falsehoods, laundered and repeated by others".

Gaza city residents told *The National* they had no way to flee safely, with some lorry drivers

charging up to \$1,000 for a ride. The only available road south was at a standstill, with people stuck for more than 12 hours, resident Aya Rajab told *The National*. "Death feels easier than this kind of suffering," she said.

Israeli army Chief of Staff Lt Gen Eyal Zamir – who was reported to have opposed the escalation in Gaza city – told troops that capturing the area would represent a "significant step" towards defeating Hamas and securing the release of Israeli hostages.

"The mission rests on your shoulders: to decisively defeat [Hamas's] Gaza city brigade," he said.

Anger at Israel's actions reached boiling point last week after it carried out air strikes on Qatar in a failed attempt to kill Hamas leaders.

At an emergency summit on Monday, Arab and Islamic nations warned that Israel's "aggressive practices" were a threat to peace in the region.

While the summit was taking place, Israel carried out strikes on Yemen's Houthi-held Hodeidah port in what it said was an attack on the Iran-backed group's military infrastructure.

In a statement, the office of French President Emmanuel Macron yesterday said that efforts to secure a two-state solution "cannot be wiped out by the ongoing Israeli operation in Gaza".

Meanwhile, UN Human Rights Commissioner Volker Turk said Israel's escalation of the Gaza war was "totally and utterly unacceptable".

"The whole world screams for peace, Palestinians, Israelis scream for peace," he added.

Further reports, pages 2-3

UAE-Azerbaijan ties strengthened



President Sheikh Mohamed and Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev at the Shusha Carpet Museum in Karabakh yesterday during an official visit by the UAE leader. The two countries signed a series of agreements in key sectors aimed at advancing their strategic partnership, state news agency Wam reported. Report, page 7 Ryan Carter / UAE Presidential Court

Rubio assures Qatar of US support as nations finalise enhanced defence deal

ALEX NICOLL

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio yesterday sought to assure Qatar of Washington's support for its sovereignty during a brief visit to Doha.

He arrived a week after Israel launched air strikes against Hamas leaders in the city, killing six people including a Qatari security officer.

Mr Rubio met Qatar's Emir, Sheikh Tamim, and Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman, for talks that lasted less than an hour.

The Qatari royal court said the three men had discussed "strategic relations" between their countries, especially in

the defence sector. As well as the Israeli attack, the meeting addressed "the future of joint diplomatic efforts to achieve a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip".

State Department spokesman Tommy Pigott said Mr Rubio "reaffirmed the strong bilateral relationship between the United States and Qatar, and thanked Qatar for its efforts to end the war in Gaza and bring all hostages home".

Mr Rubio also "reiterated America's strong support for Qatar's security and sovereignty", Mr Pigott added.

Qatar appreciates US support for its mediation efforts, Foreign Ministry spokesman Majed Al Ansari said. "This

attack expedited the need for renewed strategic defence agreements between us and the US," he added.

Mr Rubio arrived in Qatar from Israel, where he expressed "unwavering support" for the country's pursuit of Hamas, despite the attack on Doha drawing international condemnation. At an emergency summit on Monday, Arab and Islamic nations warned Israel's actions were a threat to peace in the region.

Qatar is a US ally in the Gulf and hosts the largest American airbase in the Middle East. While Washington says its alliance with Israel is ironclad, the US is seeking to repair the

damage to its ties with Gulf states after the attack on Doha.

Before travelling to Doha, Mr Rubio said Qatar and the US were close to finalising an enhanced defence co-operation agreement, and that the US would ask Qatar to continue its work mediating between Israel and Hamas.

Mr Rubio said he was pessimistic about the prospects of a ceasefire, but that Qatar was in a unique position to help.

"They have to decide if they want to do that after last week or not, but we want them to know that if there's any country in the world that could help end this through a negotiation, it's Qatar," he said.

Hezbollah pager blasts a mystery one year on

**JAMIE PRENTIS and
NADA HOMS**
Beirut

On September 17 last year, thousands of pagers carried by Hezbollah members exploded across Lebanon, killing and maiming thousands of fighters and civilians.

A year on from the operation, the Iran-backed group still has not worked out how Israel's Mossad intelligence agency was able to insert explosives into the devices, Lebanese sources have told *The National*.

"The Lebanese state hasn't

worked on it. It hasn't investigated at all. It's all Hezbollah. But Hezbollah hasn't figured it out yet," one senior security official said.

"What we have been informed of through Hezbollah is that samples of those pagers had been scanned somehow before they were delivered, and they looked clean."

The co-ordinated detonations, widely regarded as one of the largest covert operations in modern history, mark the decline of the previously dominant militia.

Besides the pager attack,

Israel is also believed to have hacked into Hezbollah's missile systems, temporarily preventing the group from using its weapons and reducing its defensive capabilities for the duration of last year's war.

"The Iranians arrived later and brought some kind of upgrades and restored some of the failed systems," another security official said.

A day after the detonations, as funerals were under way, Israel also set off rigged walkie-talkies carried by Hezbollah members.

In total, the two operations

killed at least 32 people and injured thousands. Before Hezbollah could regroup, Israel followed up with a sweeping offensive, killing the militia's senior leadership, hammering southern Lebanon with air strikes and launching a ground invasion.

"We already know that Hezbollah suspected the pagers

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