

“Where Can We Go?”: Terror and Panic Set In as Israel Readies to Invade Rafah

Palestinians in Rafah’s rapidly growing makeshift camps talk about all they have lost and endured throughout four months of Israel’s war on Gaza.

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It was a night of terror in Rafah. Early Monday morning, the Israeli military rained bombs on the city in southern Gaza that borders Egypt. The ground shook, the sound of fighter jets dropping bombs so intense and persistent that some described it as a “[fire belt](#),” a term Palestinians use to describe the prolonged targeting of nearby areas. At least [100 people](#) were killed in the bombings, which some of Rafah’s inhabitants said were among the worst of the war.

They would know. Rafah is the last available refuge for at least 1.3 million Palestinians who have fled their homes since October. They have been repeatedly displaced from across the rest of the occupied territory, making their way to an area that the Israeli military had designated a “[safe zone](#).”

An Israeli military official described Monday’s bombing as a “[diversion](#),” part of an effort to rescue two Israeli hostages. The intense assault appeared to be a prelude to many more horrors to come, as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [announced](#) on Friday that a long-feared ground invasion of the city is imminent. He ordered a mass evacuation of civilians there — a prospect that is, simply put, impossible, given the number of displaced people currently in Rafah and the fact that there is nowhere left to go.

Since the beginning of the war, Rafah has transformed into a tent city that United Nations officials warned is a “[pressure cooker of despair](#).” As the number of people killed, missing, or wounded during Israel’s four-month war recently topped 100,000, some 1.9 million people — more than 85 percent of Gaza’s population — have been internally displaced. The

vast majority of them are crammed at the border with Egypt, where they face an unprecedented [humanitarian catastrophe](#) that has been compounded in recent days by the uncertainty of Rafah's viability as the last refuge in Gaza.

In the days preceding Monday's assault, [humanitarian](#) and [human rights](#) organizations, as well as the [U.S. government](#), had issued urgent warnings that a [full-scale attack](#) on the city would be the most devastating yet.

"This escalation would significantly exacerbate the ongoing genocidal acts perpetrated by the Israeli military and authorities against the Palestinian population in Gaza," a coalition of Palestinian human rights groups [warned last week](#), noting that the feared ground invasion would be in violation of the measures ordered by the International Court of Justice last month.

International Criminal Court prosecutor Karim Khan, meanwhile, [issued a rare warning](#) on Monday implying that the latest assault on Rafah might amount to war crimes under the court's jurisdiction. It was a notable statement from Khan, who has mostly remained silent on Israeli actions during the current war in Gaza, and under whose leadership the ICC investigation into crimes committed in Palestine has [largely stalled](#).

In recent days, as people currently seeking safety in Rafah braced for the incoming assault, a single question echoed across the city: "Where can we go?"

The prospect of more loss is unfathomable. Already, Palestinians are struggling to survive in Rafah, where food and water are scarce, and the city's overburdened health infrastructure is on the brink of collapse. Even before Netanyahu announced the incoming invasion, life in Rafah had grown unbearable. In interviews conducted last month, people living in the city's rapidly growing makeshift camps talked about all they had lost since October, their harrowing escapes and repeated displacements, and the uncertainty of their life in what has become the world's largest refugee camp.



The satellite images shows the southern Gaza town of Rafah on Oct. 13, 2023 (left) and Jan. 14, 2024 (right). The town is normally home to 280,000 people. But its population has swelled to at least 1.3

million as people flee fighting elsewhere in Gaza. Sprawling tent camps now dot the city. Photo: Planet Labs PBC via AP

Dreams Destroyed

Shahad Abu Hussein and Ahmed Qadouha were ready for their wedding. She had her dress and he his suit, and the expenses for the seaside wedding hall were already paid.

Abu Hussein was looking forward to moving into their new home, which Qadouha, who worked in a television repair shop in the Tel al-Hawa neighborhood of Gaza City, had saved for years to buy. She carefully packed clothes and accessories ahead of the wedding. “My fiancé and I were supposed to begin our life together,” she said. “I couldn’t wait for this day. I had picked out my wedding dress and was so excited to begin a life with Ahmed, in our own home.”

Israel’s war on Gaza brought those plans to an abrupt halt. Their wedding, once scheduled for October 12, is indefinitely postponed. Much of the life they had planned for no longer exists: Abu Hussein’s neighborhood was “completely wiped out,” she said. She fled with her family on the first day of Israel’s assault, taking only documents and basic necessities. She heard early on in the war that her family’s home had been severely damaged. “Everything I had prepared for my new home has likely been destroyed,” she said.

Abu Hussein had dreamed of becoming a lawyer. She had recently graduated from high school and had plans to enroll at Al-Azhar University in Gaza City. In November, the [university](#) was [destroyed](#). Their wedding hall was another casualty of Israel’s bombs. Qadouha’s shop and the home he built to share with his future wife are also gone. “I worked very hard to save enough to pay for the house, the furniture, and the appliances. I spent years of my life working day and night for it, and my entire house was leveled to the ground,” he said. “All the work I did was for nothing.”

For some time, Abu Hussein and Qadouha thought they might have lost each other too. He fled the Sheikh Radwan neighborhood with some 130 members of his extended family, after Israeli forces ordered them to evacuate in October.

At first, Qadouha relocated to a refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip, but he was forced to once again move south as Israeli forces advanced. With most communication lines down because of the heavy shelling, the couple went days without knowing whether the other was alive. “I could not reach Shahad,” he said. “I was terrified that something would happen to her.”

It wasn’t until they both reached Rafah that they were reunited.

Still unmarried, they now live with a dozen relatives across from a U.N.-run school turned shelter for thousands of displaced people. Their nylon tent has been reinforced with wood and staples to give it a semblance of structure. They sleep on the ground, in the freezing cold. When it rains, the tent gets soaked, and they look for shelter along the walls of the school.

Even without the prospect of the imminent Israeli invasion of Rafah forcing them to flee once again, it’s hard for them to imagine what their future may hold.

“I cannot fathom that we might have to endure life in this tent for a long time,” said

Qadouha. "I feel utterly helpless."

Another Nakba

At a different encampment for displaced people on the other side of Rafah, 71-year-old Riyadh Al Afghani shares another tent with some 30 other people, including his wife and one of his sons. Rafah, where they arrived in late December, was the last possible stop in a weekslong exodus that began when Israeli forces destroyed their home in Gaza City in November.

Before the war started, Al Afghani lived in a 14-floor building in Rimal, a buzzy neighborhood in Gaza's most populated city, once dotted with high-rises and bustling with restaurants and shops and now [reduced to rubble](#).

In mid-November, Israeli forces called one of Al Afghani's sons and ordered him to evacuate. Later, Al Afghani also got a call. He told the soldiers that there were many women and children living in the building, but they told him to just leave, he said.

The Israeli military targeted the building that night, and the smell of smoke filled the air. "We fled the tower with children crying and women screaming," he recounted. As they ran, Israeli snipers fired on them, killing one of the women in the group, a mother of eight, in front of her husband and children. "My son Muhammed carried her and buried her body," Al Afghani recalled. They sought refuge at a neighbor's home, where they spent a "terrifying" night as bombs and gunfire relentlessly pounded the area. "Entire neighborhoods were completely devastated," Al Afghani said.

Another of Al Afghani's sons, Abdullah, a father of five, was also killed during the November assault. Al Afghani has few details about the circumstances of his son's killing, and he has not heard of his grandchildren's fate.

Al Afghani and his family made their way [south from Gaza City on foot](#). He had trouble walking so his son carried him for a while, but they eventually separated so his son and wife could escape faster. Al Afghani joined a different group of thousands of people walking toward the Egyptian border. For hours they moved through a landscape of residential buildings reduced to rubble, cement blocks and dead bodies all around them, he recalled.

As they crossed what the Israeli military had declared to be a "safe passage," an Israeli tank opened fire at the group, even as they waved a white flag and clutched their ID cards. Later, Israeli soldiers stopped the group and made people stand apart from each other, then proceeded to call young men out, beat them, and arrest them, Al Afghani recalled, echoing reports made by many others in Gaza and documented by [human rights groups](#).

Al Afghani eventually made his way to Rafah in late December, where he was finally reunited with his wife and son. But he's heard nothing from or about his five daughters and their families, who stayed in Gaza City after Israeli forces began shelling and later invaded the city. Because Israeli strikes have led to frequent communications blackouts, it's virtually impossible to get in touch with people in Gaza City.

"We are scattered, each member of my family is somewhere in the Gaza Strip," he said. "I do not know if they are alive or not."

In Rafah, he and his relatives have little access to food and water, and the sound of Israeli

airstrikes nearby is terrifying — a relentless reminder that beyond Rafah, there is nowhere else for people to run. “The danger of being bombed is constant,” Al Afghani said. He can’t afford the exorbitant cost of crossing into Egypt, with smugglers asking for up to \$10,000 per person. Even if he could, he doesn’t want to leave Gaza, where he has endured decades of Israeli occupation and several wars, although none more devastating than the current one.

Al Afghani’s family, like that of many Palestinians in Gaza, is originally from Yafa, a city that is now part of Tel Aviv. They were expelled, along some 750,000 other Palestinians, in 1948, when Israel established a state by [forcibly displacing Palestinians](#) in a manner reminiscent of today’s effort to drive them into Egypt. Al Afghani was born a refugee, and as a teenager, he witnessed the 1967 war that culminated in the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. “I lived through 1967 at the age of 15; my father has told me about the Nakba, when the Israelis expelled him from Yafa in 1948,” he said. “Still, I have never witnessed anything more horrific and cruel than this current Israeli aggression. This is genocide.”

More Than Emergency

UNRWA, the United Nations agency that’s been the primary service provider for Palestinian refugees since shortly after the establishment of the Israeli state, has struggled to keep up with the enormous humanitarian crisis in Rafah and across Gaza since the beginning of the war.

Israel launched an aggressive lobbying campaign against the relief agency several weeks ago, leveling yet [unproven accusations](#) that several agency employees were involved in the October 7 assault on Israel. Israel’s Western allies [took the bait](#) and [suspended their funding](#). But even before the cuts, the crisis in UNRWA-run centers was dire.

There are 15 UNRWA shelters in Rafah, set up after previous Israeli assaults and each with a capacity of about 3,000 people — a fraction of the number they are accommodating now. At one of them, a former school building with 40 classrooms that now houses some 25,000 people, the director described an untenable situation.

“We are not in a state of emergency; we find ourselves in a situation best described as a catastrophe,” said the director, who requested anonymity out of fear of being targeted by Israel.

“All the centers combined can only house 45,000 people. This falls significantly short of the over 1 million and a half people displaced from across the strip.”

Already before this week’s bombings, the crisis had forced agency staff to make dramatic decisions. At the beginning of the war, the director noted as an example, UNRWA allocated half a can of meat for each displaced person. Today, one can has to be shared among 10 people. “The conditions in the school are catastrophic,” he said. “The food we provide for the displaced is insufficient to cover even 5 percent of what they need.”

Only one doctor and one nurse are on site, and essential medicine is hard to come by, the director said. Despite that, they are doing their best to tend to people’s needs. At least 18 women have gone into labor while displaced at the school, the director said. Early on, the shelter’s staff drove them by ambulance to a hospital in Rafah, but as fuel grew scarce, many of them turned to donkey-drawn carts.

One of those women is Sahar, whose husband was killed in October while waiting in line to buy bread at a bakery Israeli forces [bombed](#). Pregnant at the time, she fled to Rafah with her two children and made her way to the school, where she gave birth to a third. At the time, she had not heard from her parents and siblings since shortly after the war started. She now shares a classroom with 40 other women and children, and she was embarrassed because her baby wouldn't stop crying. "I cannot find milk or diapers for him," she said to the director.

He told her that the staff distributed one diaper at the time to stretch out supplies, but when Sahar came in, there were none left. "I'm sorry," he said.

Sahar's ordeal is a somber reminder that women and children are facing the brunt of Israel's assault. They make up 70 percent of those killed, according to [U.N. figures](#), and are at greater risk of starvation. "We can barely provide enough water for basic use," the director said.

"I did eight years of training in disaster and crisis management but what we are currently enduring in Gaza, with Israel's systematic destruction of the Gaza Strip, is beyond description," he added. "No human can bear it."

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