Israel bombards central Gaza as tanks advance deeper in Rafah

CAIRO (Reuters) – Israeli forces bombarded the Gaza Strip's historic refugee camps in the centre of the enclave and struck Gaza City in the north on Thursday, killing at least 13 people, and tanks pushed deeper into Rafah in the south, health officials and residents said.

One Israeli airstrike killed six people in Zawayda town in central Gaza and two other people were killed in a strike on a house in Bureij camp. An Israeli air strike killed three people in a car in Deir Al-Balah, a city packed with people displaced from elsewhere in Gaza, health officials said.

In Gaza City in the north, medics said two Palestinians were killed in another airstrike.

The Israeli military said in a statement its forces killed two senior Islamic Jihad commanders in two airstrikes in Gaza City, including one whom it said had taken part in the Oct. 7 attack in southern Israel that triggered the Gaza war.

In Rafah, residents said Israeli tanks advanced deeper in the western side of the city and took position on a hilltop there. The Israeli military said forces located several tunnels and killed several gunmen.

The armed wing of militant group Hamas and its allies said they fired mortar bombs at Israeli forces in southwest Rafah on Thursday.

More than a million people had sought shelter in Rafah from fighting further north, but most have scattered again since Israel launched an offensive in and around the city in May.

The fighting has pushed the 60-bed Red Cross field hospital in Rafah to the brink of capacity, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said in a statement on Thursday.

“The repeated mass casualty events resulting from the unrelenting hostilities have stretched to breaking point the response capacity of our hospital – and all health facilities in southern Gaza – to care for those with life-threatening injuries,” said William Schomburg, head of the ICRC’s subdelegation in Gaza.

CEASEFIRE EFFORTS STALLED

More than nine months into the war, Palestinian fighters led by Hamas are still able to attack Israeli forces with anti-tank rockets and mortar bombs, occasionally firing rocket barrages into Israel.

Israel vowed to eradicate Hamas after its militants killed 1,200 people and took more than 250 hostage in the Oct. 7 attack, according to Israeli tallies. More than 38,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel’s retaliatory offensive since then, Gaza health authorities say.

On Tuesday, Israel said it had eliminated half of the leadership of Hamas’ military wing and killed or captured about 14,000 fighters since the start of the war. Israel says 326 of its soldiers have been killed in Gaza.

Hamas doesn’t release figures of casualties among its ranks and said Israel was exaggerating to portray a “fake victory”.

Diplomatic efforts by Arab mediators to halt the hostilities, backed by the United States, appear on hold, though all sides say they are open to more talks, including Israel and Hamas.

A deal would aim to end the war and release Israeli hostages in Gaza in return for many Palestinians jailed by Israel.

Hamas was awaiting an Israeli response to a ceasefire offer

drafted by the United States based on ideas announced by President Joe Biden, a Palestinian official close to the mediation effort said.

“The feeling in Hamas is that (Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin) Netanyahu is stalling and that he might not say anything before he goes to the United States next week,” said the official, who asked not to be named.

Reuters