

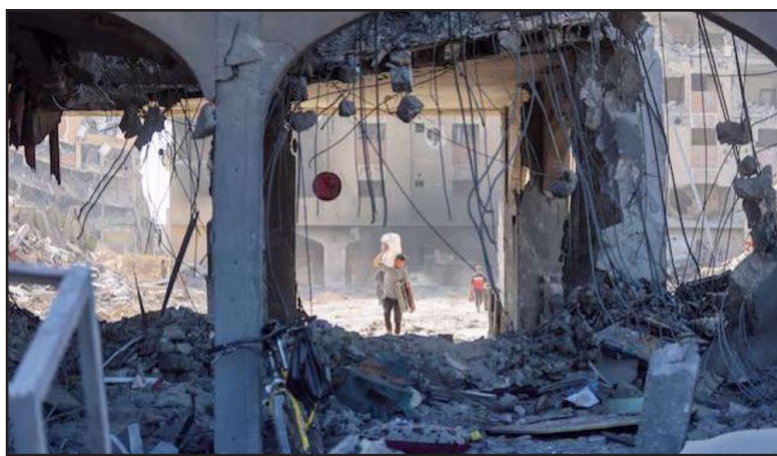
Aid Group: Israel Assault on Rafah Would Bring 'Disaster' to West Asia

NEW YORK (Dispatches) – An Israeli assault on southern Gaza's Rafah area would spell disaster for civilians, not only in Gaza but across West Asia, the head of an aid group warned on Friday, saying the region faced a "countdown to an even bigger conflict", Reuters reports.

Jan Egeland, the Secretary-General of the Norwegian Refugee Council, told Reuters that 1.3 million civilians seeking refuge in Rafah – including his aid group's staff – were living in "indescribable fear" of an Israeli carnage.

Egeland urged Zionist prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, not to go through with the operation. "Netanyahu, stop this. It is a disaster not only for the Palestinians; it would be a disaster for Israel. You will have a stain on the Israeli conscience and history forever," he said.

The NRC head spoke to Reuters in Lebanon, where he visited southern villages that he said were caught in a "horrific crossfire".



A Palestinian man carries belongings as he walks through the rubble of a destroyed residential building following an Israeli strike, in Hamad City, amid Israel's ongoing war on Gaza, in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip on March 13, 2024.

The exchanges of fire have been taking place in parallel with the Gaza war, and have intensified in recent days.

"I am just scared that we haven't learned from 2006," said Egeland, referring to the month-long war between Lebanon's resistance movement Hezbollah and Israel that was the last bloody confrontation between the two sides, during which he headed the United Na-

tions' relief operations.

"We do not need another war in the Middle East. At the moment, I'm feeling like (this is a) countdown to an even bigger conflict," he said.

Israel has been waging genocide for more than six months against the Gaza Strip, saying it aims to eradicate Hamas.

However, since then, it has been revealed by Haaretz that heli-

copters and tanks of the Israeli army had, in fact, killed many of the 1,139 soldiers and civilians claimed by Israel to have been killed by the Palestinian resistance.

Israel's carnage has killed more than 34,300 Palestinians, Gaza health authorities say, and laid waste to much of the widely urbanized enclave, displacing most of its 2.3 million people and leaving many with little food, water or medical care.

"Gaza has had a bigger bombardment than even Aleppo, even Raqqa, even Mosul," Egeland said, referring to cities in Syria and Iraq that have been ravaged by fierce bombing campaigns in the last decade. "We haven't seen it in modern times, which shows that this is indiscriminate."

He said a modest improvement in aid deliveries had allowed some bakeries to reopen in Gaza, but that, with border crossings still shut, famine was still looming. An attack on Rafah would paralyze aid operations "in an instant", he said.

U.S. Troops Begin Construction of Controversial Pier Off Gaza

GAZA STRIP (Dispatches) – The U.S. military has started the construction of a controversial maritime pier off the coast of Gaza, claiming that it seeks to bring aid into the besieged strip.

"I can confirm that U.S. military vessels, to include the USNS Benavidez, have begun to construct the initial stages of the temporary pier and causeway at sea," Pentagon spokesperson Major General Patrick Ryder told reporters.

U.S. President Joe Biden ordered the construction of the pier in March. Shortly afterwards, the U.S. deployed naval ships to the Eastern Mediterranean to construct the "floating pier" that

will reportedly receive aid from Cyprus, and send it onward to Gaza.

The U.S. announcement came amid mounting pressure on Israel to allow aid into Gaza as the UN and other aid agencies have warned of imminent famine due to Israel's prevention of the land-based delivery of life-saving aid to Gaza.

The deputy UN food chief said on Thursday the northern Gaza Strip is still heading toward a famine.

World Food Program (WFP) Deputy Executive Director Carl Skau called for a greater volume of aid to be allowed into Gaza and appealed for Israel to allow

direct access from the southern Ashdod port to the Erez crossing.

The pier is scheduled to become operational in May.

Reuters quoted a senior Biden administration official, who asked not to be named, as saying that aid coming off the corridor will still need to pass through Israeli checkpoints on land, raising questions about possible delays even after aid reaches shore.

That is despite the aid having already been inspected by Israel in Cyprus prior to being shipped to the besieged strip.

According to the official, nearly 1,000 U.S. troops would support the military effort, in-

cluding in coordination cells in Cyprus and Israel.

The Israeli military said its troops would protect the U.S. troops who are setting up the pier and provide logistics support for it.

Last month, experts said Israel backed the U.S. plan to construct the pier in order to retain control over the aid deliveries and as a way to displace Palestinians from the besieged strip via the Mediterranean Sea, ahead of an expected invasion of the southern town of Rafah, where nearly more than half of Gaza's population of 2.4 have sought shelter from Israeli strikes elsewhere in Gaza.

UN Says It Could Take 14 Years to Clear Debris in Gaza

GENEVA (Dispatches) – The vast amount of rubble including unexploded ordnance left by the Zionist regime's devastating war in the Gaza Strip could take about 14 years to remove, a United Nations official said on Friday.

The occupying regime's genocidal campaign against Palestinians in Gaza has reduced much of the nar-

row, coastal territory of 2.3 million people to a wasteland with most civilians homeless, hungry and at risk of disease.

Pehr Lodhammar, senior officer at the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), told a briefing in Geneva that the war had left an estimated 37 million tons of debris in the widely urbanized, densely

populated territory.

He said that although it was impossible to determine the exact number of unexploded ordnance found in Gaza, it was projected that it could take 14 years under certain conditions to clear debris, including rubble from destroyed buildings.

"We know that typically there's a

failure rate of at least 10% of land service ammunition that is being fired and fails to function," he said. "We're talking about 14 years of work with 100 trucks."

At least 34,305 Palestinians have been killed and 77,293 wounded in Israel's military onslaught on Gaza since Oct. 7, according to Gaza's health ministry.

systems," said the Survey, adding that it found reports of the Soviet-designed systems or their components in 13 of the affected MENA countries.

The research group pointed to "successful launches" of decades-old Strela-2 systems in the Gaza Strip and Iraq.

Armed groups in at least nine countries in the region had access to advanced shoulder-fired missiles during the time period studied by the group.

"This is notable because advanced MANPADS are significantly more capable than older systems," the Survey said.

Illicit users include Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the Daesh terrorist group and its affiliates, the Libyan National Army (LNA) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party.

which have more accurate targeting, are available in the region. Easy to transport and use, they are particularly attractive to non-state armed groups.

The group identified reports of 12 different models of illicit MANPADS in the arsenals of armed groups in 13 of the 26 countries in the region from 2015 to mid-2023.

"Chinese-designed MANPADS are gradually supplanting Soviet/Russian models," the organization said, adding that most of them arrive in the region via third-party importing states.

Shoulder-fired missiles of North Korean design are also circulating in the region, particularly in Syria.

"First-generation Strela-2-pattern MANPADS remain the most widely proliferated

Report: Portable Missiles Proliferating in Mideast, North Africa

PARIS (AFP) – Armed groups in the Middle East and North Africa have little difficulty getting their hands on portable surface-to-air missiles despite a campaign to prevent their proliferation, according to a report published Friday.

Shoulder-fired missiles -- also known as man-portable air-defence systems, or MANPADS -- in the hands of militants are seen as a threat because of their ability to target military aircraft, but also passenger planes.

"Despite long-standing international efforts to curb the illicit proliferation of MANPADS, armed groups in the MENA region continue to acquire and use these systems," the Small Arms Survey, an independent research group based in Geneva, said in a new report.

Both older versions and advanced systems,

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Africa solve its problems in different spheres.

He named agriculture, industry, medicine, healthcare, and building refineries and power plants as some of the areas that can help Iran forge stronger ties with Africa.

"Overseas cultivation is another important capacity. Raw materials can be supplied for all economic operators and production centers by Africa at a reasonable price," he said.

Senior officials, including economy ministers, are taking part in this edition of the conference that will wrap up its activities on Monday.

Later Friday, the president met Burkina Faso's Prime Minister Joachim Kyelem de Tambela, stressing that Iran has the joint interests of the Islamic Republic and African nations at heart.

De Tambela said that his country is willing to give a boost to relations with the Iranian people who have created such a big civilization.

He touched on the West's enmity with Iran, saying the Islamic Republic is an independent developing country, nonetheless.

He also stressed his country's willingness to cooperate with Tehran on infrastructure, information and communication technology, mines, agriculture, animal husbandry, transportation, science, culture, energy and knowledge-based technologies.

Iran is expanding its footprint in Africa, part of a major strategic shift that has involved high-level Iranian diplomatic and trade delegations. The country hopes to build partnerships that will help it bypass U.S.-led sanctions.

"Iran has been seeking to expand its political and economic reach further beyond its region," said Lukas Webber, senior consultant for Valens Global and co-founder of Militant Wire. And due to Western sanctions, Webber said, "Iran has extra incentive to pursue new trade opportunities with African countries."

Iranian officials have lauded the potential to gain access to Africa's agricultural and mineral wealth while finding new destinations for Iranian exports. Raisi, underscoring the importance of the strategy, made a three-country tour to Africa in July -- the first by an Iranian president to the continent in more than a decade.

This week, Iran is touting the second Iran-Africa trade summit in just over a year, with representatives from more than 30 African countries attending the April 26-29 event in Tehran.

An Iranian official responsible for the promotion of international business said that "the future of world trade will be determined in Africa." And unlike with other major powers that have sought to tap into Africa's "unexploited virgin resources," he said, African countries do not have "political angles" with Iran.

In recent months, Iran has made its presence felt from the Horn of Africa to the Sahel. Tehran has worked to patch things up with Eritrea and Sudan, which fell out with Iran after joining a Saudi-led coalition against Yemen.

Pro...

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Commenting on maritime operations by Yemeni naval forces, Houthi said Yemeni forces are looking to expand their operations in the Indian Ocean in such a way that it would catch Americans, Britons and Zionists by surprise.

"Over the 202 days of the Gaza war, we have targeted 102 ships. On average, we have targeted an Israeli-linked ship every two days," he said.

U.S. and British militaries, he said, have failed to stop Yemeni missile and drone strikes despite strict monitoring and escort of ships.

Yemeni attacks, he added, have rendered the Israeli Port of Eilat on the Red Sea non-operational, and incurred substantial losses on the regime.

"Yemeni attacks have led to 40% decrease in Israeli imports, and reduced the Zionist regime's exports by at least 22%. The maritime operations have also lowered the traffic of U.S. ships through the Red Sea by 80%.

"As long as the siege and aggression against Gaza continues, our operations in the Red Sea will continue. We won't downgrade our naval operations, but rather intend to expand our operations in the Indian Ocean," Houthi stated.

Hezbollah...

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The Israeli military's attacks on Palestinian students, teachers and academic institutions across Gaza during the war have acted as a catalyst for the university protests.

Last week, a group of United Nations experts noted that 80 percent of schools in the Palestinian enclave have been damaged or destroyed since the war began in early October. Nearly 5,500 students have been killed, alongside 261 teachers and 95 university professors.

As uncertainty swirls around the future of the U.S. university encampments amid threats they will be dismantled, the students say they remain committed to continuing their protests — and to keeping the focus on what's happening in Gaza.