

Palestinian Death Toll from Israeli Offensive in Gaza Climbs to 330

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The number of people killed has risen sharply since the Israeli army escalated its “Operation Protective Edge,” a campaign of massive air raids and naval barrages intended to stop rocket attacks from Gaza, by launching a ground invasion Thursday night.

More than 70 Palestinians died in Israeli attacks on towns in the northern and southern part of the coastal enclave during the initial 24 hours of the ground offensive, the Israeli military’s first invasion of Gaza – controlled by the Palestinian militant group Hamas – in five years.

Bombing was particularly intense in the towns of Beit Lahia and Beit Hanoun, where an artillery shell fired by Israeli forces killed a family of eight, including four minors.

Three members of another family died in a bombardment Friday night in the southern part of Gaza, which has also been pounded by land, sea and air.

In the southern town of Khan Younis, four people were killed and five others were wounded Friday night, while 10 others died in the Israeli military’s bombing of the town of Rafah, near the border with Egypt.

Nearly 80 of the fatalities have been children, who account for nearly half of Gaza’s population, and countless other minors must cope with the trauma, fear and sleepless nights that 12 days of constant bombardment has produced.

Israeli artillery units are bombing the coastal enclave from combat positions established on

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Gaza's side of the border.

At nightfall, Israeli planes fire dozens of flares that light up the sky and illuminate neighborhoods to facilitate ground operations, while combat aircraft and warships launch missiles at their targets.

The latest crisis erupted last month, when Israel began a massive search for three Jewish seminary students who went missing June 12 in the occupied West Bank and were found murdered 18 days later.

Israel blamed the abductions on Hamas, which has said it has no information concerning the kidnap-murders, and arrested 500 people, most of them linked to the group.

Tensions flared after a Palestinian teenager was abducted in Jerusalem before dawn on July 2 and found burned to death hours later in a suspected revenge killing for the murders of the three Israeli students.

Israel brought an end to its 38-year occupation of Gaza in 2005 by withdrawing its forces and pulling out its settlers, although Palestinians still resent Israel's crippling economic blockade of the coastal enclave.

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