



(From left, clockwise) Debris fly following an Israeli air strike, amid Israeli-Palestinian fighting, in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday; Hamas explosive experts remove an unexploded Israeli missile from a house in Khan Yunis; and a Palestinian boy injured in an Israeli airstrike lies in a Gaza hospital.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

'Mama, Baba, Boom!'

Toddlers and families learn to live with Gaza bombardment

REUTERS, Gaza

The Mashharawi family have already fled their home to a relative's apartment in the Gaza Strip and are prepared for another dash at any time.

For more than a week, since a conflict erupted with Israel, they have retreated each evening to the windowless corridor, with vital documents and other items packed and ready to grab.

"Our life is full of fear. There is no safety at all," said Mohammad al-Mashharawi, a father of triplets aged five and a one-year-old infant.

Mashharawi and his family left their own home after a heavy bombardment earlier in the week but ready to move again in moments notice.

His wife says her one-year-old daughter had been learning words like "mama" and "baba", but has now added the word of an explosion - "boom".

Diplomacy towards a ceasefire between Israel's military and Palestinian militants in Gaza has yet to deliver an end to the unrelenting exchange of fire, running through the day and night.

Israeli air strikes and artillery fire as well as the militants' rocket attacks often intensify after the sun sets.

In densely populated Gaza, there are fewer places to run. Many of the 2 million people packed into this narrow strip of land are already refugees, whose families fled towns and cities now in Israel.

Gaza's Housing Ministry says more than week-long bombardments have damaged 16,800 housing units damaged, with 1,000 of them destroyed and 1,800 uninhabitable.

Biden sticks to the playbook, but why?

AGENCIES

With his muted response to the Gaza conflict, President Joe Biden is largely sticking to a time-worn US playbook despite pressure from progressive Democrats for a tougher line toward Israel and from America's allies for a more active role to end the violence.

By citing Israel's right to defend itself against a rocket barrage from the Hamas-ruled enclave and only nudging Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu toward a ceasefire, Biden has effectively given Israeli forces more time to press their offensive against Palestinian militants there. The US has blocked every Security Council action on the issue.

Taking note of the disproportionate casualties, some progressive Democrats, a group that helped Biden win the Democratic nomination and the presidency, are pushing for him to be more assertive with Israel. Biden so far has shown no signs of giving much ground.

The Democratic-led House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee met on Monday, after which some members said its chairman, Representative Gregory Meeks, planned to send a letter asking Biden to delay a planned \$735 million smart bomb sale to Israel. However, Meeks had decided by midday on Tuesday not to send the letter.

So why do American presidents and politicians support Israel unequivocally? The answer isn't simple but public opinion in US, Israel's presence in a hostile Middle East and the way the US

political campaign runs play a certain part.

After the Holocaust, when Israel became a state in 1948, the US was the first country to recognise it. Moreover, this was right after World War II, when the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union was taking shape.

The Middle East, with its oil reserves and strategic waterways (think the Suez Canal) was a key battleground for superpower hegemonic influence. The US was taking over from severely weakened European powers as the primary western power broker in the Middle East. Israel's creation gave US the geostrategic edge it needed.

ISRAEL-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

The close bond that the US, Israel formed over the years through wars and crises only deepened over the time, thanks to Israel's contribution to US economy, arts and media.

The American public opinion is also heavily tilted to Israelis. According to a Gallup poll found that 58 percent of Americans sympathise more with Israel, while 75 percent of Americans rate Israel favourably.

However the trend is changing. The February poll found that 25 percent of Americans sympathise more with Palestinians - a 2-percentage-point increase over the previous year and a full six percentage points higher than 2018.

Large majorities of the US Congress in the

Democratic and Republican parties are avowedly pro-Israel. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi, House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer - all Democrats - have long track records of supporting Israel.

Republicans are even more protective of Israel. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said anyone who advocates for a ceasefire is "basically suggesting that there is moral equivalency" between Israel and Hamas.

However, in recent times pro-Palestinian voices are becoming louder in Congress.

Besides political veterans like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, new progressives like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley and Rashida Tlaib - the first Palestinian American elected to Congress - have emerged as leading voices for Palestinians.

These younger newcomers are not as reliant on the traditional fundraising structures of US politics and are more motivated by concern about Israel's treatment of Palestinians.

Sanders and Warren have called for conditioning US military aid to Israel on Palestinian human rights. Despite being one of the richest countries in the world, Israel is the largest recipient US aid. In 2019, it received \$3.8 billion as foreign military aid.

But the voices are too faint still and it is safe to say that official US policy towards the issue may not change soon.

'Roof knocking'

Israel warning system under scrutiny in Gaza conflict

AFP, Jerusalem

A text message, a phone call, or an initial strike on the roof. Israel says it gives Gaza civilians warnings to evacuate before bombardment, but activists say it is not nearly enough.

In the besieged coastal enclave of some two million inhabitants, under near-relentless bombardment from the Israeli military for the past 10 days, many are railing against flaws in the "roof knocking" technique.

The campaign on the territory run by Islamist group Hamas has killed at least 230 Palestinians, including 65 children, Gaza health authorities say, and displaced tens of thousands from their homes.

Many relatives say their family members are being bombed without warning, while others say their telephones have rung, but they weren't given enough time.

This was the case on Saturday for Jawad Mehdi, the owner of Jala Tower in Gaza City that was until Saturday home to the offices of two foreign media outlets.

Mehdi said an Israeli intelligence officer warned him he had one hour to ensure the building was evacuated. Journalists barely could scramble down the stairs, before a missile slammed into the 13-storey building, flattening it.



The Israeli military has been calling residents, sending them text messages, dropping flyers or firing low-yield bombs onto roofs since its war on Gaza in 2008-2009.

During that campaign, the Israeli military said it had made 165,000 phone calls to residents in Gaza instructing them to leave home immediately, often sending pre-recorded messages in Arabic.

The UN humanitarian agency in a 2009 report said that in some cases the strike occurred only five minutes after the phone call. But it is unclear how often the Israeli military has tried to give such prior notice in the latest Gaza conflict.

An Israeli air force officer, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said 1,000 strikes had hit the enclave, but a warning had not been issued in all cases.

Record 55m people internally displaced worldwide

AFP, Geneva

Conflicts and natural disasters forced someone to flee within their own country every second of last year, pushing the number of people living in internal displacement to a record high, monitors said yesterday.

This came despite strict restrictions on movement imposed around the globe in efforts to halt the spread of Covid-19, which observers had expected to push down displacement numbers last year.

But 2020 was also marked by intense storms, persistent conflicts and explosions of violence, forcing 40.5 million people to become newly displaced within their countries, according to a joint report by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC).

That is the highest number of newly displaced reported in 10 years, and brings the total number people living in internal displacement around the world to a record 55 million, the report showed.

"Both numbers this year were



unusually high," IDMC director Alexandra Bilak told AFP, saying the surge in internal displacement was "unprecedented".

The number of internally displaced people is now more than double the some 26 million people who have fled across borders as refugees.

"It's shocking that someone was forced to flee their home inside their own country every single second last year," NRC chief Jan Egeland said in a statement.

"We are failing to protect the world's most vulnerable people from conflict and disasters."

Bilak said it was "particularly concerning that these high figures were recorded against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic".

Pointing out that movement restrictions obstructed data collection and "fewer people sought out emergency shelters for fear of infection", she suggested the true figures were higher.

The pandemic had meanwhile exacerbated socioeconomic conditions for displaced people, she said, warning that "those numbers may rise even more as countries go down further into an economic crisis."

The report found that three quarters of people who fled internally last year were victims of natural disasters, in particular ones related to extreme weather.

Intense cyclones, monsoon rains and floods hit highly exposed and densely populated areas in Asia and the Pacific, while the Atlantic hurricane season "was the most active on record," it pointed out.

Experts say that climate change is increasing the intensity and frequency of such extreme weather events.

In addition, nearly 10 million of those newly displaced last year were fleeing conflicts and violence, the report said.



Demonstrators clash with Riot police during a new protest against the government of Colombian President Ivan Duque, in Medellín on Wednesday evening. The protest movement in Colombia took to the streets again on Wednesday before sitting down to negotiate with the government an eventual solution to the crisis fuelled by police abuses.

PHOTO: AFP



Moroccan migrants help an African fellow facing difficulties in the water at the border between Morocco and the Spanish enclave of Ceuta in Fnideq, Spain stepped up diplomatic pressure on Rabat as its prime minister flew into Ceuta, vowing to "restore order" in the North African enclave after a record 8,000 migrants reached its beaches from Morocco. Photo was taken on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

PROBE ON CAPITOL RIOT

US House votes to set up commission

AFP, Washington

The US House voted Wednesday to establish a bipartisan commission to investigate January's deadly riot at the US Capitol, overcoming tensions for now amid rising Republican hostility to an independent fact-finding panel.

One day after top House Republican Kevin McCarthy came out against the commission, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell also expressed opposition, raising hurdles to Senate passage more than four months after the violence.

But the House of Representatives at least temporarily weathered a brewing storm, voting 252 to 175 to approve legislation that establishes a 10-member panel commission.

Thirty-five Republicans bucked their party's leadership and joined Democrats in supporting the effort.

"This commission is built to work, and it will be depoliticized, and it will get the results we need," House Republican John Katko, who worked with Democrats to craft a deal on the commission, told his colleagues on the floor.

"I urge all of you in the body, all of you on



both sides... to set aside politics just this once -- just this once."

In January McConnell blamed Donald Trump for inciting violence at the Capitol, which was overrun by the then-president's supporters seeking to block certification of the election won by Joe Biden.

This week McConnell said he remained open to supporting a commission if changes were made to its structure, but by Wednesday he hardened his opposition.

He pointed to ongoing law enforcement

investigations that have already resulted in more than 400 arrests, and said a new panel might cause unnecessary overlap.

The legislation that would create a commission evenly split between five members chosen by Democrats and five chosen by Republicans. Each side would have equal subpoena power.

But McConnell's opposition, coming a day after Trump urged Republicans to oppose it, complicates passage in the Senate.

The chamber is divided 50-50, but at least 10 Republicans would have to join Democrats for the measure to become law.

"It sounds like they (Republicans) are afraid of the truth, and that's most unfortunate," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the top Democrat in Congress, told reporters.

Some Republicans critical of the panel said it would merely serve as a vehicle to attack Trump. Other Republicans say they would like broader scope to allow investigation into last year's violence at Black Lives Matter protests, but Pelosi refused.

She said the panel would be similar to the high-profile 9/11 commission created in 2002.