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Gaza

“Militarily, Hamas cannot be wiped out”

Knut Dethlefsen represents the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in the Palestinian Territories. He reports on the consequences of the Israeli air attacks

ZEIT ONLINE: What does the situation in the Gaza Strip look like on the fourth day of the Israeli air strikes?

Knut Dethlefsen: The situation in the Gaza Strip is catastrophic. Just in the night of Monday to Tuesday, there were 100 Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip, carried out by F16 bombers, combat helicopters, and warships. The number of fatalities since the start of the air strikes on Saturday is between 300 and 400, and over 1,600 people have been injured.

ZEIT ONLINE: What about the care of the wounded?

Dethlefsen: The Gaza Strip has only a few hospitals with an intensive care unit. These are not able to cope with the large number of casualties, some of whom are seriously injured. Many are in critical condition. Yesterday and today some relief supplies arrived, but the hospitals are short of many medicines. The United Nations have their own infrastructure, and the International Red Cross and the Red Crescent relief organizations are on the spot, But for two months, the Israelis have allowed practically no supplies into the Gaza Strip, so the warehouses are nearly empty.

ZEIT ONLINE: How can the wounded be helped?

Dethlefsen: Israel must lift the Gaza Strip blockade, in part at least. The Gaza Strip has been locked down for eighteen months. Both sides should agree on a ceasefire as quickly as possible. Until this happens, we need a humanitarian corridor, which will enable the numerous casualties to be cared for and other humanitarian assistance to be provided.

ZEIT ONLINE: Are the attacks really hitting Hamas?

Dethlefsen: The Israeli air force has destroyed a large part of the infrastructure, as well as buildings of the police force, which is controlled by Hamas. But the Hamas leadership has gone underground and is preparing its some 20,000 fighters for an Israeli ground offensive. It is above all the civilian population which is being hit.

ZEIT ONLINE: Why can the Hamas installations not be destroyed without harm being inflicted on so many civilians?

Dethlefsen: The Gaza Strip is one of the most densely populated regions in the world. Everything there is cheek by jowl. And since the Israeli army is also attacking residential buildings where Hamas members live, their neighbors are also affected. On Saturday, fighter planes attacked a police station at noon, just as school was out. In the attack, for example, seven pupils and a teacher from a UN relief agency (UNRWA) school died.

ZEIT ONLINE: Is there any protection for the civilian populations?

Dethlefsen: The Gaza Strip does not have any air raid shelters. The families crouch in their homes, not knowing where to seek protection.

ZEIT ONLINE: How great is the damage in the Gaza Strip?

Dethlefsen: A lot of residential buildings are in ruins, and schools as well as six mosques have been destroyed. The Islamic University has been flattened. This was not a Hamas military training center, but a college.

ZEIT ONLINE: How are the Palestinians in the West Bank reacting to the attacks?

Dethlefsen: Among the Palestinians there is a strong feeling that Israel is attacking them all. There are many demonstrations against the air raids, in Israel as well. The country has a population of about a million Palestinians who hold Israeli passports. In the demonstrations acts of violence also took place, the entire region is being destabilized. In the capitals of Israel's Arab neighbors, thousands have also protested against Israel's attacks on the Gaza Strip.

ZEIT ONLINE: And what reactions have you found among the Israelis?

Dethlefsen: In Israel there are intellectuals who are against the air raids. They are speaking out, for example, in the daily newspaper Haaretz. However, the majority of the population are probably in favor of the iron fist policy. They are hoping that this will put a stop to Hamas' rocket attacks. There is an election campaign in Israel, so no politician wants to display weakness, and thus both left-wing and right-wing politicians are supporting the air raids.

ZEIT ONLINE: How likely is an Israeli invasion?

Dethlefsen: According to my informants in the Gaza Strip, 100 Israeli tanks have already crossed the border, but have not yet advanced deep into the Gaza Strip. Since Hamas, together with Islamic Jihad, has fired dozens of rockets at Israel overnight, a ground offensive is very likely.

ZEIT ONLINE: What would Israel hope to achieve by invading?

Dethlefsen: The goal is to eliminate Hamas. I cannot imagine that Israel wishes once again to permanently occupy the Gaza Strip.

ZEIT ONLINE: Can the Israeli army win this conflict?

Dethlefsen: Militarily, Hamas cannot be wiped out. The Israel army can weaken the organization by means of its attacks, but at the same time it increases its political ratings. This madness must stop.

ZEIT ONLINE: Do you see a way out of this conflict?

Dethlefsen: The Europeans could assume the role of mediator together with Turkey. Turkey has good ties with Israel, but it is capable of talking to Hamas as well. Turkish politicians are already travelling around the region. And England and France have also become involved. Since the US administration is not capable of acting because of the upcoming change of president, Europe must now assume a stronger role.

Knut Dethlefsen is the resident representative of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung office in the Palestinian Territories. He lives and works in East Jerusalem.

The questions were asked by Hauke Friederichs.