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Israeli troops and their armored vehicles wait to enter the Palestinian town of Bethlehem.

West Bank's largest city falls to Israelis on sixth day

BETHLEHEM, West Bank (AP) — Israeli tanks rolled into the West Bank's largest city, Nablus, on Wednesday and elsewhere laid siege to a refugee camp, battling Palestinians who barricaded entrances and fought back with bombs and guns. Troops also encircled Palestinian gunmen holed up in the church marking Jesus' birthplace.

Twelve Palestinians and an Israeli soldier were killed on the sixth day of Israel's offensive aimed at crushing Palestinian militias and stopping terror attacks on Israeli civilians.



SOURCE: Associated Press

towns under full Israeli control — Ramallah, Qalqiliya, Jenin, Tulkarem and Bethlehem — tanks patrolled streets, enforcing strict curfews that confined hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to their homes. In Ramallah, residents were without water after city officials said Israeli troops destroyed the main pumping station when shelling a Palestinian security compound.

The incursion into Nablus — a city of more than 100,000 people in the northern West Bank — began Wednesday evening. Shellfire thundered as tanks began rolling into the city. Gunmen and Palestinian police were moving in the streets, closing roads with sandbags and planting mines.

A Palestinian woman was killed and five people wounded, apparently when shells hit two apartments in downtown Nablus. Fighting was heaviest Wednesday in Jenin, a militant stronghold north of Nablus that Israel has invaded six times before in the past 18 months of fighting.

Dozens of tanks entered Jenin and surrounded the adjacent refugee camp early Wednesday. Helicopters and tanks fired machine guns at gunmen who hurled grenades and fired assault rifles. Five people, including a militia leader, a nurse and a 13-year-old boy, were killed in the fighting. An Israeli officer was also killed.

Armed men in the camp had prepared large amounts of homemade grenades and bombs and built barricades to make it harder for Israeli tanks to enter. Militiamen claimed they damaged tracks of six tanks.

Ali Safouri, a militia leader, said he and his men felt that, judging by Israel's tough sweep through Ramallah, this was their last stand. He said they were trying to make every bullet count. "We use it for sniping only, we are not shooting in all directions," Safouri said by telephone.

support for the Israeli assault. "He understands and respects Israel's right to defend herself," White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said.

But daily anti-Israeli protests in the Arab world grew more violent. Thousands of Lebanese and Palestinians clashed with security forces Wednesday outside the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, with at least 25 reported injured as protesters threw stones and security forces used tear gas and water cannons.

Under pressure to cut off ties completely with Israel, Egypt took a more limited step Wednesday, announcing it would suspend all diplomatic contacts with Israel except those aimed at helping the Palestinians.

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