

Deadly strikes in Gaza as Israel commits to talks

AFP News- Israel carried out deadly airstrikes in Gaza on Saturday and engaged in combat with Hamas fighters, while to the north it exchanged fire with Hezbollah militants across the Lebanese border.

The fighting raged as diplomatic efforts to halt the war, which will enter its tenth month on Sunday, continued with Israel saying on Friday it would send a delegation next week to continue talks with Qatari mediators.

In a statement announcing the move, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's spokesman said "gaps" remained with Hamas on how to secure a ceasefire and hostage release deal.

That came after a delegation led by the head of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency, David Barnea, held a first round of talks with mediators in Doha.

"It was agreed that next week Israeli negotiators will travel to Doha to continue the talks. There are still gaps between the parties," the spokesman said.

There has been no truce since a one-week pause in November during which 80 Israeli hostages were freed in return for 240 Palestinians held in Israeli prisons.

The war continued unabated on Saturday, with Israel's military saying it had conducted operations across much of the Gaza Strip, including Shujaiya in the north, Deir al-Balah in central Gaza and Rafah in the south.

Shujaiya is among the areas the military had previously declared to be cleared of Hamas, but where fighting is again taking place.

The health ministry in the Hamas-run territory said at least

87 people had been killed in the past 48 hours, and paramedics on Saturday reported 10 deaths in an air strike on a house in Nuseirat refugee camp in central Gaza.

The Hamas press office and paramedics said four journalists working for local media outlets were killed in strikes overnight, and the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, said two of its employees had been killed.

According to UNRWA, which coordinated much of the aid delivered to Gaza, 194 of its employees have been killed in the war.

– ‘Ball in Israel’s court’ –

The United States, which has mediated talks alongside Qatar and Egypt, has talked up the prospects of a deal saying there is a “pretty significant opening” for both sides.

US President Joe Biden announced a pathway to a truce deal in May that he said had been proposed by Israel.

This included an initial six-week truce, Israeli withdrawal from Gaza population centres and the freeing of hostages by Palestinian militants.

Talks subsequently stalled, but a US official said on Thursday that a new proposal from Hamas “moves the process forward and may provide the basis for closing the deal”.

Senior Hamas official Osama Hamdan told AFP that new ideas from the group had been “conveyed by the mediators to the American side, which welcomed them and passed them on to the Israeli side. Now the ball is in the Israeli court.”

The war began with Hamas’s unprecedented October 7 attack on southern Israel that resulted in the deaths of 1,195 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally based on Israeli figures.

The militants also seized hostages, 116 of whom remain in Gaza including 42 the military says are dead.

In response, Israel has carried out a military offensive that has killed at least 38,098 people in Gaza, also mostly civilians, according to the health ministry in the Hamas-ruled territory.

The war has uprooted 90 percent of Gaza's population, destroyed much of its housing and other infrastructure, and left almost 500,000 people enduring "catastrophic" hunger, UN agencies say.

The main stumbling block to a truce deal has been Hamas's demand for a permanent end to the fighting, which Netanyahu and his far-right coalition partners strongly reject.

The veteran hawk demands the release of the hostages but also insists the war will not end until Israel has destroyed Hamas's ability to make war or govern.

– Sirens and air strikes –

Cross-border fire between Israel and Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah movement has occurred almost daily since the Gaza war began, but has escalated notably over the past month.

That has raised fears of a major conflagration between the staunch enemies which could draw in Iran and other powers.

On Saturday morning, sirens blared over northern Israel and the military said it had downed a "suspicious aerial target" and two "hostile aircraft" launched from Lebanon fell in open ground.

The military said earlier it had attacked "a number of Hezbollah terror targets in southern Lebanon" overnight, all near the border.

US officials, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken,

have voiced hope that a ceasefire in Gaza could also lead to an easing of violence on the Israel-Lebanon border.

AFP