US envoy says end to Israel-Hezbollah war ‘within grasp’

AFP- US special envoy Amos Hochstein said on a visit to Beirut that an end to the Israel-Hezbollah war was “now within our grasp” as he met with officials to discuss a truce plan largely endorsed by Lebanon.

The United States and France have spearheaded efforts for a ceasefire in the war, which escalated in late September after nearly a year of deadly exchanges of fire between Hezbollah and Israeli troops.

Israel expanded the focus of its operations from Gaza to Lebanon, vowing to secure its northern border to allow tens of thousands of people displaced by the cross-border fire to return home.

Since the clashes began with Hezbollah’s attacks on Israel, more than 3,510 people in Lebanon have been killed, according to authorities there. Most of the fatalities have been recorded since late September, including more than 200 children, according to the UN.

Following a meeting on Tuesday with Hezbollah-allied parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri, who has led mediation on behalf of the group, Hochstein told reporters he saw “a real opportunity” to end the Israel-Hezbollah war.

“I’m here in Beirut to facilitate that decision, but it’s ultimately the decision of the parties… It is now within our grasp,” he added.

The leader of Hezbollah, Naim Qassem, was expected to give a speech later on Tuesday.

A Lebanese official who has been following the truce talks

closely had said on Monday that his government had “a very positive view” of the plan.

Another official said Lebanon had been waiting for Hochstein’s arrival “so we can review certain outstanding points with him”.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Monday that Israel would continue to conduct military operations against Hezbollah even if a ceasefire was reached.

“The most important thing is not (the deal that) will be laid on paper,” Netanyahu told parliament.

“We will be forced to ensure our security in the north (of Israel) and to systematically carry out operations against Hezbollah’s attacks… even after a ceasefire”, to keep the group from rebuilding, he said.

Netanyahu also said there was no evidence Hezbollah would respect any ceasefire.

— Deaths in Lebanon and Israel —

Hezbollah began its cross-border attacks on Israel in support of its ally Hamas, following the Palestinian group’s attack on Israel on October 7, 2023.

Hamas’s attack — the deadliest in Israeli history — resulted in the deaths of 1,206 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally of Israeli official figures.

The health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said the death toll in the war has reached 43,972 people, a majority of them civilians. The United Nations considers the figures reliable.

Since expanding its operations to Lebanon in September, Israel has conducted extensive bombing campaigns primarily targeting Hezbollah strongholds there, though some strikes have hit areas outside the Iran-backed group’s control.

A strike on Monday on central Beirut killed five people and wounded 31 others, said the health ministry.

The area of the capital that was hit has in recent weeks become home to many who have fled Hezbollah's main bastion in the southern suburbs.

The UN said Tuesday that more than 200 children had been killed in Lebanon since Israel escalated its campaign.

"Despite more than 200 children killed in Lebanon in less than two months, a disconcerting pattern has emerged: their deaths are met with inertia from those able to stop this violence," said James Elder, spokesman for the UN children's agency UNICEF.

Israel has also sent ground troops into Lebanon, while Hezbollah has continued to launch projectiles into Israel almost daily.

On Tuesday, Israel's military said some 40 projectiles were fired into central and northern Israel, lightly wounding four people.

That followed salvos on Monday that killed one woman in Shfaram and injured 10 people there and five in Israel's commercial hub of Tel Aviv.

Hezbollah said it launched attack drones against "sensitive military points… in the city of Tel Aviv" and shot down an Israeli drone in south Lebanon.

The group said on Tuesday it fired a salvo of rockets at the northern Israeli town of Kiryat Shmona.

— 'Comprehensive' ceasefire —

State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said the United States had shared proposals with both Lebanon and Israel for a ceasefire.

“Both sides have reacted to the proposals that we have put forward,” he said.

“There has been an exchange of different ideas for how to see what we believe is in everyone’s interest, which is the full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, and we’re going to continue to stay at that process.”

Under UN Resolution 1701, which ended the last Hezbollah-Israel war of 2006, Lebanese troops and UN peacekeepers should be the only armed forces deployed in south Lebanon, where Hezbollah holds sway.

It also called for Israel to withdraw troops from Lebanon.

Another Lebanese official said US ambassador Lisa Johnson discussed the plan last week with Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati and with parliamentary speaker Berri.

The official said the proposal comprised “13 points spanning five pages”.

If an agreement is reached, the United States and France will issue a joint statement, he said, followed by a 60-day truce during which Lebanon will redeploy troops in the southern border area, near Israel.

However, Eyal Pinko, a retired Israeli navy commander and senior research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar Ilan University near Tel Aviv, said hopes for a speedy ceasefire were “wishful thinking”.

“The most important thing that is required is that there will be no Hezbollah 30 to 40 kilometres from the border so that Israel can protect itself if there is a ground manoeuver,” Pinko said.

“Iran and Hezbollah would not accept that.”

He cautioned that Israel was still “very far from” bringing

southern Lebanon under control, and warned of “more surprises” to come.

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