Israeli cabinet to vote on Gaza ceasefire deal

AFP- Israel's cabinet was expected to meet Thursday to approve a ceasefire and hostage-release deal with Hamas, Israeli media reported, a day after mediators announced an agreement they hope will lead to a permanent end to the Gaza war.

The truce would take effect on Sunday and involve the exchange of Israeli hostages for Palestinian prisoners, after which the terms of a broader peace deal would be finalised, the prime minister of mediator Qatar said Wednesday.

Even as thousands across Gaza celebrated the ceasefire announcement, the territory's civil defence rescue agency said on Thursday that fresh Israeli strikes had killed at least seven people in the Gaza City area.

The agreement caps months of fruitless negotiations to end the deadliest war in Gaza's history. It will pause hostilities one day before the inauguration of US President-elect Donald Trump, whose Middle East envoy was involved in the talks.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke with both US President Joe Biden and Trump on Wednesday, his office said, thanking them for their help securing the agreement but also cautioning that "final details" were still being worked on.

Israeli President Isaac Herzog, who holds a largely ceremonial role, said the deal was the "right move" to bring back hostages seized during the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack that sparked the war.

That attack, the deadliest in Israeli history, resulted in the deaths of 1,210 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally of official Israeli figures.

Israel’s ensuing campaign has destroyed much of Gaza, killing 46,707 people, most of them civilians, according to figures from the Hamas-run territory’s health ministry that the UN considers reliable.

Demonstrators in Tel Aviv calling for the release of the hostages rejoiced as news of the agreement spread, while thousands across Gaza celebrated the reported deal.

“I can’t believe that this nightmare of more than a year is finally coming to an end. We have lost so many people, we’ve lost everything,” said Randa Sameeh, a 45-year-old displaced from her home in Gaza City.

Hamas said the ceasefire was the “result of the legendary steadfastness of our great Palestinian people and our valiant resistance in the Gaza Strip”.

– ‘Last page of the war’

Israeli media reported that the cabinet was set to vote on the ceasefire agreement on Thursday morning. Two of Netanyahu’s ministers have publicly opposed it.

Far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich said the agreement was a “bad and dangerous deal for the security of the State of Israel” while National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir called it “disastrous”.

The deal followed intensified effort from mediators Qatar, Egypt and the United States.

Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani told a press conference on Wednesday that the “two belligerents in the Gaza Strip have reached a deal”.

“We hope that this will be the last page of the war, and we hope that all parties will commit to implementing all the terms of this agreement,” he said.

The three countries would monitor the implementation of the ceasefire via a body based in Cairo, he said.

During the initial 42-day ceasefire, 33 hostages would be released, the prime minister said, “including civilian women and female recruits, as well as children, elderly people, as well as civilian ill people and wounded”.

Also in the first phase, Israeli forces would withdraw from Gaza’s densely populated areas to allow for the exchanges, as well as “the return of the displaced people to their residences”, he said.

Palestinian militants took 251 people hostage during the October 7 attack, 94 of whom are still being held in Gaza, including 34 the Israeli military says are dead.

– Unlikely pairing –

Announcing the deal from the White House, Biden said he was “deeply satisfied this day has come”, calling the negotiations some of the “toughest” of his career.

He added that an unfinalised second phase of the agreement would bring a “permanent end to the war”, and he was “confident” the deal would hold.

Envoys from both Trump’s incoming administration and Biden’s outgoing one had been present at the latest negotiations, with a senior Biden official saying the unlikely pairing had been a decisive factor in reaching the deal.

“This EPIC ceasefire agreement could have only happened as a result of our Historic Victory in November” in the US election, Trump said on social media.

The president-elect added that his White House would “continue to work closely with Israel and our Allies to make sure Gaza NEVER again becomes a terrorist safe haven”.

– Aid rapidly needed –

Biden said the deal would “surge much needed humanitarian assistance to Palestinian civilians, and reunite the hostages with their families”.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi also underscored the “importance of accelerating the entry of urgent humanitarian aid” into Gaza as he welcomed news of the deal.

Egypt’s state-linked Al-Qahera news outlet cited a security source as saying coordination was “underway” to reopen the Rafah crossing on Gaza’s border with Egypt to allow the entry of aid.

Iran, which backs Hamas, welcomed the ceasefire deal, with its supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei hailing Palestinian “resistance”.

The UN’s Palestinian refugee agency, UNRWA, facing an Israeli ban on its activities set to take effect later this month, welcomed news of the deal.

“What’s needed is rapid, unhindered and uninterrupted humanitarian access and supplies to respond to the tremendous suffering caused by this war,” UNRWA head Philippe Lazzarini wrote on X.

AFP