

Israel commits to new Gaza talks ahead of Trump meeting

AFP- Israel said it was sending a team to negotiate the next phase in its fragile ceasefire with Hamas, signalling possible progress ahead of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's meeting with US President Donald Trump on Tuesday.

Netanyahu will be the first foreign leader to meet Trump in the White House since his return to power last month, and will likely face some pressure to honour the ceasefire the US leader has claimed credit for.

Hours before their meeting, Netanyahu's office said Israel would send a delegation to the Qatari capital Doha later this week for negotiations.

Hamas has said it is ready to negotiate the second stage of the ceasefire, mediated by Qatar, the United States and Egypt, and which should focus on a more permanent end to the war.

The first phase, which took effect on January 19, halted more than 15 months of bombardment and fighting that has levelled much of the Gaza Strip.

In line with the agreement, Hamas and Israel have begun exchanging hostages held in Gaza for prisoners held in Israeli jails.

"Israel is preparing for the working-level delegation to leave for Doha at the end of this week in order to discuss technical details related to the continued implementation of the agreement," Netanyahu's office said following meetings with Trump's advisors, including Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff.

– 'Redrawn the map' –

The war began when Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023,

taking into Gaza 251 hostages, dozens of whom have since been confirmed dead.

The conflict has devastated much of Gaza, while families of the Israeli hostages have been urging all sides to ensure the agreement is maintained so their loved ones can be freed.

Relatives of the youngest hostages, Ariel and Kfir Bibas, made a plea on Monday for information on the two boys and their mother, Shiri, after their father Yarden Bibas was released in the latest swap.

“Shiri, Ariel and Kfir, we miss you so much and are waiting for you with Yarden now,” Ofri Bibas, Yarden’s sister, said.

Trump has touted a plan to “clean out” Gaza, calling for Palestinians to move to Egypt or Jordan.

Both countries have flatly rejected his proposal, as have the territory’s own residents.

“We are the owners of this land; we have always been here, and will always be. The future is ours,” said Majed al-Zebda, a father of six whose house was destroyed in the war.

Before leaving for Washington, Netanyahu said Israel’s wars with Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon and its confrontations with Iran had “redrawn the map” in the Middle East.

“But I believe that working closely with President Trump we can redraw it even further, and for the better,” he said.

Netanyahu hailed the fact he would be the first foreign leader to meet Trump since his inauguration as “testimony to the strength of the Israeli-American alliance.”

Trump, who prides himself on his dealmaking abilities, will be pushing Netanyahu to stick to the agreement, possibly offering incentives such as a normalisation deal with Saudi Arabia.

Efforts under Trump's predecessor Joe Biden for normalisation froze with the Gaza war, and Saudi Arabia has in recent months hardened its position.

– Focus on West Bank? –

Trump said Sunday that talks with Israel and other Middle Eastern countries were “progressing” – but warned that he had “no assurances” that the truce in Gaza would hold.

“I have no assurances that it will hold, I mean I've seen people brutalised, nobody's ever seen anything like it, no I have no guarantees that the peace is going to hold,” he said.

Witkoff, who met Netanyahu on Monday over terms for the second phase of the truce, said however that he was “certainly hopeful”.

Since the truce took effect, Israel has turned its focus to the occupied West Bank, launching a deadly operation in the area around Jenin, a hotbed of Palestinian militancy.

UN aid agency UNRWA, which is now banned in Israel, warned the refugee camp of Jenin was “going into a catastrophic direction”.

On Tuesday, the Israeli army said a gunman killed two Israeli soldiers in an attack on a military post in Tayasir in the West Bank. The assailant was also killed.

Asked about how he viewed a possible annexation of the West Bank, Trump told reporters: “It's a small country in terms of land.”

“It's a pretty small piece of land. And it's amazing that they've been able to do what they've been able to do,” he said.

Under the Gaza ceasefire's ongoing 42-day first phase, Hamas was to free 33 hostages in staggered releases in exchange for

around 1,900 Palestinians held in Israeli jails.

Four hostage-prisoner exchanges have already taken place, with militants freeing 18 hostages in exchange of some 600 mostly Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails.

The truce has also led to a surge of food, fuel, medical and other aid into Gaza, and allowed people displaced by the war to return to their neighbourhoods in the north of the Palestinian territory.

Hamas's attack resulted in the deaths of 1,210 people on Israeli side, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally based on official Israeli figures.

Israel's retaliatory response has killed at least 47,518 people in Gaza, the majority civilians, according to the Hamas-run territory's health ministry. The UN considers these figures as reliable.

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