

# Israel cabinet approves plan including Gaza 'conquest'

AFP – Israel's security cabinet approved the expansion of military operations in Gaza including the "conquest" of the Palestinian territory, an official said Monday, after the army called up tens of thousands of reservists for the offensive. The plan, approved overnight, includes the holding of territories in the besieged Gaza Strip and comes alongside Israel's promotion of Gaza's residents to leave, the official said.

Israel resumed major operations across Gaza on March 18 amid deadlock over how to proceed with a two-month ceasefire that had largely halted the war with Hamas, which was sparked by the militants' October 2023 attack.

Israel has since carried out intensive aerial bombardments and expanded ground operations across the Palestinian territory, with Gaza rescuers on Monday saying Israeli air strikes killed at least 19 people in the north.

The Israeli official said the plan for expanded operations "will include, among other things, the conquest of the Gaza Strip and the holding of the territories, moving the Gaza population south for their protection".

The majority of Gaza's residents hail from the north of the territory, particularly Gaza City, and nearly all have been displaced at least once since the war began.

The cabinet, which includes Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and several ministers, "unanimously approved" the plan aimed at defeating Gaza's rulers Hamas and securing the return of hostages held in the territory.

The official source said the plan included "powerful strikes against Hamas", without specifying their nature.

On Sunday, army chief Lieutenant General Eyal Zamir said the military was calling up “tens of thousands” of reservists to expand its offensive.

– ‘Sacrificing’ hostages –

The health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said Sunday that at least 2,436 people had been killed since Israel resumed its campaign on March 18, bringing the overall death toll from the war to 52,535.

Hamas’s attack on October 7, 2023 that triggered the war resulted in the deaths of 1,218 people on the Israeli side, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally based on official figures.

Militants also abducted 251 people, 58 of whom are still being held in Gaza, including 34 the Israeli military says are dead.

Israel says its renewed offensive is aimed at forcing Hamas to free its remaining captives, although critics charge that it puts them in mortal danger.

An Israeli campaign group representing hostages’ relatives said Monday that the new plan for expanded military operations in Gaza is “sacrificing” hostages held there.

“The plan approved by the cabinet deserves to be called the ‘Smotrich-Netanyahu Plan’ for sacrificing the hostages,” the Hostages and Missing Families Forum said in a statement.

The reference was to far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and Netanyahu, who heads one of the most right-wing governments in Israeli history.

– ‘Enough food’ –

Alongside the plan to expand military operations, Prime Minister Netanyahu “continues to promote” a proposal by US President Donald Trump for the voluntary departure of Gazans

to neighbouring countries, the source added.

Days after taking office in January, Trump floated a proposal to move Gaza's population out of the war-battered territory, suggesting that Egypt or Jordan could take them in.

Both countries, along with other Arab allies, governments around the world and the Palestinians themselves, have flatly rejected the notion, but the notion has been seized on by Israeli ministers.

Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz said in February that a special agency would be established for the "voluntary departure" of Gazans.

Israel's security cabinet also approved overnight the "possibility of humanitarian distribution" in Gaza, which has been under full Israeli blockade since March 2.

It said there was "currently enough food" in the territory, although humanitarian organisations and UN agencies have warned of the blockade's dire consequences for Gaza's 2.4 million people.

The UN's World Food Programme (WFP) has said it has depleted its food stocks and that the 25 bakeries it supports in Gaza have closed due to a lack of flour and fuel.

The cabinet "approved by a large majority the possibility of a humanitarian distribution, if necessary, to prevent Hamas from taking control of the supplies and to destroy its governance capabilities", the official said.

AFP photos published over the weekend showed crowds of Gazans, including children, piling up at a charity kitchen in the territory, desperate for a bite to eat.

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