

Egyptian cease-fire mediators shuttle between Israel, Gaza

Author:

Thu, 2019-03-28 19:53

JERUSALEM: Egyptian mediators headed to Israel on Thursday to discuss a proposal for a new cease-fire plan between Israel and Hamas, even as the sides braced for the possibility of renewed violence this weekend. As negotiations continued, Hamas was making preparations for a mass demonstration along the Israeli border on Saturday. In response, Israel said it was moving additional troops to the area.

Ismail Radwan, a top Hamas official, said the Egyptians were expected to return to Gaza later Thursday or early Friday following their meetings with the Israeli side.

He signaled that if there is progress, Hamas would scale back Saturday's demonstration. The protest, marking the one-year anniversary of the weekly gatherings, is expected to be exceptionally large.

"The new understanding, if implemented, would make our people in Gaza feel a significant relief," Radwan said. He said if Israel "was committed to the understandings, then Saturday's march would be peaceful."

Three Hamas officials familiar with the negotiations said the Egyptians were offering the organization a series of measures to ease a crippling Egyptian-Israeli blockade on Gaza. In exchange, Hamas would have to pledge to halt rocket fire and keep border protests under control and far from the separation fence.

The officials say the deal would only take effect after Saturday's demonstration – a likely sticking point with the Israelis.

They said the Israeli gestures would include an expanded fishing zone for Palestinian anglers off the Mediterranean coast, increasing imports and exports in and out of Gaza, increased electricity from Israel and increased movement of people through Gaza's border crossings.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because the negotiations were ongoing. One of the officials described the atmosphere as positive.

There was no immediate Israeli comment on the talks.

Nearly 200 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire during the protests. Israel says it is defending its border against infiltration attempts, noting that protesters have hurled flaming tires, explosives and incendiary balloons across the border. But the military has come under heavy international criticism over the large number of unarmed people who have been shot, sometimes hundreds of meters (yards) away from the border.

During a trip to the southern border region, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he was prepared to take further military action in Gaza, but only as a last resort.

Netanyahu made his comments Thursday after visiting troops sent to the Gaza border this week after a two-day outbreak of fighting.

The Israeli military said it had beefed up its troop presence along the border with the Gaza Strip and completed preparations for possible renewal of hostilities.

The army said issued a video showing soldiers massing near the border and performing urban combat drills.

“If we need a broader operation, we will enter it strong and confident, and after we have exhausted all other options,” Netanyahu said.

Earlier this week, Israel carried out retaliatory airstrikes against Hamas after a rocket fired from Gaza destroyed a house north of Tel Aviv and wounded seven Israelis. Palestinian militants responded with rocket barrages in some of the most intense fighting since a 2014 war. A fragile calm has held since early Wednesday.

In the midst of the negotiations, the Israeli military said its planes bombed a group of Palestinians who had launched incendiary balloons from Gaza into Israel. The Gaza health ministry confirmed three Palestinians were wounded in the bombing.



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40 children killed in year of Gaza border protests: UNICEF
Netanyahu says prepared for 'comprehensive' Gaza operation

Amnesty condemns Syria regime strikes on Idlib school, hospitals

Author:

Thu, 2019-03-28 19:48

BEIRUT: Amnesty International accused Syria's government and its Russian allies Thursday of striking medical facilities and a school in rebel-held Idlib province with air and artillery strikes over the past month.

After eight years of war, "the Syrian government continues to show utter disregard for the laws of war and the lives of civilians," it said in a statement.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, regime strikes since February on the northwestern province controlled by the jihadist group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham have left at least 170 civilians dead and displaced thousands of others.

Amnesty said "a hospital, blood bank and other medical facilities as well as a bakery and a school" had been hit in Idlib.

"The Syrian government, with the support of Russia, is clearly resorting to the same unlawful military tactics which led to massive displacement, in some cases forced displacement," it said.

Amnesty said its report was based on witness testimonies backed up by "analysis of videos, open source information and satellite imagery."

On March 15, the United States accused Russia and the Syrian government of being responsible for "escalating violence" in Idlib.

"Despite Russia's claims to be targeting terrorists, these operations have caused dozens of civilian casualties and have targeted first responders as they attempt to save lives on the ground," a State Department spokesman said. A Turkish-Russian truce deal was struck in September to stave off a planned regime assault that aid groups feared could spark the Syrian conflict's worst humanitarian crisis to date.

The offensive has been held off but the deal's provisions have not been implemented.



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Israeli strikes hit northern Aleppo city, damages materials only: Syria Idlib bombing raises doubts over future of Astana agreement

[US criticized for recognizing Israeli sovereignty over Golan](#)

Thu, 2019-03-28 19:42

UNITED NATIONS: The US came under sharp criticism from the 14 other Security Council nations Wednesday for its decision to recognize Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights in violation of council resolutions.

Speaker after speaker at the open meeting supported Syria's sovereignty over the strategic plateau and opposed Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights and President Donald Trump's proclamation earlier this week.

As South Africa's UN Ambassador Jerry Matjila said, "this unilateral action does nothing to assist in finding a long-term peaceful solution to the conflict in the Middle East."

He and others pointed to resolutions calling for Israel to end its occupation of the Golan Heights, including a December 1981 Security Council resolution that called Israel's annexation of the strategic area "null and void and

without international legal effect.”

Syria’s closest ally Russia urged governments to continue to view the Golan Heights as Israeli-occupied territory.

“If anybody feels any temptation to follow this poor example, we would urge them to refrain from this aggressive revision of international law,” Russia’s deputy ambassador Vladimir Safronkov said.

While Syria got support on its sovereignty over the Golan Heights, German Ambassador Christoph Heusgen and Britain’s Ambassador Karen Pierce also used the meeting to criticize President Bashar Assad’s government for bombing civilians, using chemical weapons and violating human rights violations during the ongoing eight-year civil war.

Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria in the 1967 Mideast war and annexed it in 1981. A 1974 cease-fire agreement that officially ended the 1973 Mideast war led to the deployment of a UN peacekeeping force known as UNDOF on the Golan Heights.

Trump’s proclamation that the Golan Heights are part of Israel raised questions about the future of UNDOF after its mandate expires on June 30. US political coordinator Rodney Hunter told the council UNDOF has “a vital role to play in preserving stability between Israel and Syria,” an assurance that the Trump administration’s recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the strategic plateau won’t affect its operation.

He said the force’s mandate to ensure that the area of separation between Syria and Israel “is a buffer zone free from any military presence or activities” is of “critical strategic and security importance” to Israel, and “can contribute to the stability of the entire Middle East.”

Hunter said US recognition that the Golan Heights are part of Israel doesn’t affect the 1974 cease-fire agreement, “nor do we believe that it undermines UNDOF’s mandate in any way.”

He strongly criticized “the daily presence of the Syrian armed forces” in the area of separation, where UNDOF is the only military force allowed, calling their presence a violation of the 1974 cease-fire agreement.

The US calls on Russia to use its influence with President Bashar Assad “to compel the Syrian forces to uphold their commitment” to the cease-fire agreement “and immediately withdraw from the area of separation,” Hunter said.

UN peacekeeping chief Jean Pierre Lacroix told the council there is “a continued significant threat” to UNDOF personnel from explosive remnants of war, “and from the possible presence of sleeper cells of armed groups including (UN) listed terrorist groups.”

Undersecretary-General Rosemary DiCarlo expressed hope that “the recent developments will not be used as an excuse by anyone to pursue actions that could undermine the relative stability of the situation on Golan and beyond.”



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Saudi Shoura, OIC slam US decision on Golan Heights
Pakistan rejects US recognition of Golan Heights as Israeli territory

[Israeli strikes hit northern Aleppo city, damages materials only: Syria](#)

Thu, 2019-03-28 01:29

The Syrian army on Wednesday intercepted several missiles that were fired by Israeli jets during raids on an industrial zone in the northern city of Aleppo with damage to materials only, state television said.

“The Israeli aggression targeted some positions in Sheikh Najar industrial zone and a number of enemy missiles were brought down,” an army statement said.

Military experts say Aleppo is one of the main areas where Iran’s elite Revolutionary Guards have a strong military presence where it supports local militias that have for years been fighting alongside the Syrian army to defeat insurgents.

Israel, which considers Iran as its biggest threat, has repeatedly attacked Iranian targets in Syria and those of allied militia, including Lebanon’s Hezbollah.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said Israel had carried out “hundreds” of attacks over the past few years of Syria’s war to curtail Iran and its ally Hezbollah.

With an election approaching, Israel’s government has increased its attacks in Syria and has also taken a tougher stance toward Hezbollah on the border with Lebanon.



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Syria says Israeli warplanes hit Damascus airport warehouse
Syrian state media says Israel artillery strikes Quneitra province

[Ship hijacked near Libya by migrants rescued at sea](#)

Author:

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Wed, 2019-03-27 21:46

VALLETTA, Malta: Migrants hijacked a cargo ship in Libyan waters Wednesday and forced the crew to redirect the vessel north to Europe, according to Italian and Maltese authorities.

As the vessel headed in a direction leading to the island nation of Malta and Italy's shores, both countries vowed to keep the hijacked ship out of their territorial waters.

Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini identified the ship as the Turkish oil tanker El Hiblu 1 and said the crew had earlier rescued migrants in the Mediterranean Sea. He put the number of migrants on board at around 120 and described what was happening as "the first act of piracy on the high seas with migrants that hijacked" a cargo ship.

"Poor castaways, who hijack a merchant ship that saved them because they want to decide the route of the cruise," Italian news agency ANSA quoted Salvini saying with sarcasm.

There was no immediate word on the condition of El Hiblu I's crew. Other information about the reported hijacking was unavailable or difficult to confirm while the vessel remained at sea.

Italian media reports said the ship was heading to Libya to drop off the group that was rescued when migrants seized control six miles from the Libyan coast.

A private group that operates a rescue ship and monitors how governments treat migrants, Mediterranea Saving Humans, urged compassion for the group on the hijacked vessel and said it hoped European countries would act "in the name of fundamental rights, remembering that we are dealing with human beings fleeing hell."

The Armed Forces of Malta said military personnel were standing by and the tanker still was in Libyan territorial waters as of early Wednesday night. A Maltese military official told Maltese media the ship was carrying 108 migrants. The official was not authorized to speak to reporters and requested anonymity.

The official also said Malta would not allow the ship to enter the country's waters.

Salvini said weather conditions were not good and it was too early to tell if the ship was being directed toward Malta or Italy's Lampedusa island. But he had a message for the pirates: "Forget about Italy."

Mass migration to Europe has dropped sharply since 2015, when the continent received one million refugees and migrants from countries in the Middle East, Asia and African. The surge created a humanitarian crisis in which desperate travelers frequently drowned and leading arrival spots such as Italy and Greece struggled to house large numbers of asylum-seekers.

Along with the dangerous sea journey itself, those who attempt to cross the Mediterranean risk being stopped by Libya's coast guard and held in Libyan detention centers that human rights groups have described as bleak places where migrants allegedly suffer routine abuse.

European Union member countries, responding to domestic opposition to welcoming immigrants, have decided to significantly downscale an EU operation in the Mediterranean, withdrawing their ships and continuing the mission with air surveillance only.

EU officials on Wednesday lamented the move, while Amnesty International

reiterated its view that Europe's collaboration with Libya to stem migration was a human rights outrage.

EU members "alert the Libyan coast guard when refugees and migrants are spotted at sea so they can be taken back to Libya, despite knowing that people there are arbitrarily detained and exposed to widespread torture, rape, killings and exploitation," Matteo de Bellis, an international migration researcher for Amnesty. "This shameful decision has nothing to do with the needs of people who risk their lives at sea, but everything to do with the inability of European governments to agree on a way to share responsibility for them."



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HRW criticizes Italy, EU's Libya migrant policy
Europe, N. Africa ministers seek to curb Libya migrant flows