

Israeli military says complete withdrawal from Gaza “out of the question”

By Julie Hyland
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Israel continued to withdraw some of its troops from the Gaza Strip Tuesday, in moves timed to coincide with the inauguration of US President-elect Barack Obama.

Announcing an end to Operation Cast Lead early Sunday morning, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had said his government intended to remove its forces "at the greatest possible speed." The Israeli army has confirmed, however, that a "complete withdrawal is out of the question" at this time.

A senior defence official stated Tuesday, "We are reducing the number of troops in the Gaza Strip, but the troops outside that territory remain on the alert so they can react rapidly if necessary." Later unconfirmed reports said the Israeli navy had fired into Gaza in what was described as a "deterrent measure" and that a Palestinian was shot and wounded by Israeli gunfire near the Kissufim border crossing. No further details were available at the time of this writing.

An estimated 1,300 Palestinians were killed in Israel's 22-day offensive and more than 5,000 injured.

The number of Palestinians dead and wounded is expected to rise as efforts begin to clear the rubble. As United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon began a tour of Gaza, journalists finally allowed access to parts of the territory reported massive damage.

"Entire neighbourhoods have disappeared," the BBC reported. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics said at least 4,100 homes have been totally destroyed and 17,000 others damaged. About 1,500 factories and workshops, 20 mosques, 31 security installations and 10 water or sewage pipes were also damaged, it added.

An estimated 50,800 people are homeless and 100,000 people have been displaced. Some 400,000 people are without running water and electricity is available for less than 12 hours a day.

The UN said that 50 of its facilities had been damaged and 21 medical facilities. Speaking in front of the ruins of the UN food warehouse destroyed by Israel's bombardment, Ban described the attack as "outrageous" and reiterated his call

for a full investigation into the assault and "to make those people responsible accountable."

Statements supplied by Gaza residents to the human rights group B'Tselem told how the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) mowed down civilians attempting to surrender. According to one account, four members of the A-Najar family from the village of Khuza'a, east of Khan Yunis, were killed when they obeyed instructions from the IDF to evacuate their home. As they left in groups of two, waving white flags, soldiers opened fire, killing the family members.

There is further evidence of Israel's use of white phosphorus, illegal in heavily populated areas. The *Guardian* ran film footage shot by the International Solidarity Movement in Khoza'a, in the south of the Gaza Strip, showing clumps of the chemical burning on the ground.

Christopher Cobb-Smith, a weapons expert for Amnesty International, said they have found "streets and alleyways littered with evidence, including still-burning wedges and the remnants of the shells and canisters fired by the Israeli army." Hospital doctors reported treating many casualties with terrible burns consistent with phosphorus.

John Ging, director of the UN relief agency UNRWA, said it was now vital to get basic supplies, such as food, medicine and fuel, into the territory. "We have a big recovery operation ahead of us, reconstruction--none of it will be possible of course, on any scale, until we get crossing points open."

Israel has allowed just 143 aid trucks into Gaza and has ruled out lifting its blockade for the foreseeable future. UN agencies have been told that they must "prove that material could not be used for arms, according to diplomats, that money would go directly to local contractors, and that Hamas would not be able to take credit for anything," the *Times* of London reported.

EU and UN urge support for Abbas

Writing in the *Guardian*, Alastair Crooke, former security adviser to the European Union, complained of a "messy,

ambiguous 'end'" to hostilities.

The unilateral character of the ceasefire means Israel is beholden to little. Tel Aviv remains opposed to any discussions on the future of Gaza and the Palestinian people that involve Hamas. It is even regarded as having sidelined Egypt, the Arab state which had done the most to facilitate Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip.

Egyptian Foreign Ministry official Hossam Zaki told the *Jerusalem Post* of his country's disappointment that its mediation efforts were effectively bypassed by Israel. "We expected the Israeli side to behave in a different way," he said. Israel's declaration of a ceasefire was not taken "in consultation with Egypt, meaning that it did not choose to abide by the terms that we were able to negotiate with the Palestinians," he complained.

The sole agreement concluded by Israel was with Washington--the memorandum of understanding agreed jointly on Friday, committing the US to provide greater information-sharing, technical assistance and the use of other "assets" to prevent arms entering Gaza.

While Israel is claiming victory, there is concern over the broader ramifications of its actions for the whole region. Throughout the three weeks of conflict, the Arab League was unable to agree on a unified stance on the offensive in Gaza, further discrediting it amongst the Arab masses.

It was, in part, an effort to shore up the credentials of more overtly pro-Western regimes which they fear have been dangerously undermined by the Israeli action that saw the heads of Europe's major powers gather in Sharm el-Sheikh on Monday.

The leaders of France, Britain, Germany, Italy, Spain and Turkey attended the summit, hosted by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, where they called for the opening of border crossings, pledged humanitarian assistance to rebuild Gaza and promised to aid in policing its borders.

In addition to boosting Mubarak in the face of popular hostility for his refusal to open Egypt's borders with Gaza to fleeing refugees, the *Financial Times* said the summit "also provided an opportunity to try to shore up the credibility of Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority (PA)," who addressed the gathering.

To this end, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, the European Union's external relations commissioner, emphasised that any aid was conditional on Gaza being ruled by leaders acceptable to the EU. While she did not explicitly rule out Hamas, she suggested strongly that Abbas and the Palestinian Authority must retake control of the territory.

Similarly, at an economic summit of the Arab League in Kuwait on Tuesday, Ban urged the 17 heads of state to rally "under the leadership of President Abbas."

Concerns over "internationalising" the ceasefire

Israel has also ruled out any aid to Gaza while Hamas remains in power, and is said to be considering passing responsibility for reconstruction to the World Bank, UNRWA or the PA. "We are trying to figure out ways to reconstruct Gaza without Hamas," an Israeli official said.

But behind apparent agreement vis-a-vis Hamas is the potential for future conflict going far beyond Israel/Palestine.

Egypt and Jordan were the only Arab countries in attendance at the Sharm el-Sheikh conference on Sunday. And a closed-door session at the Arab Economic Summit on Tuesday failed to reach a common agreement on the ceasefire or even the setting up of an expected Gaza reconstruction fund. Kuwait's official news agency KUNA blamed "the uncompromising stances taken by some countries," while others spoke of the League fracturing between a "Doha-Syria axis" and an alliance led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Israel and the US were also absent from the Sharm el-Sheikh meeting. Subsequently Israel dismissed French proposals made at the gathering for an international conference "to create a Palestinian state."

"France and Egypt have been pushing the idea of an international conference for years, but it is not going anywhere," a senior Israeli diplomatic official, speaking anonymously, said.

Adding to concerns were the comments made by Charles Heyman, editor of *Armed Forces of the United Kingdom*. The Associated Press reported that Heyman had "been told by people with knowledge of the discussions that officials in Brussels are talking behind the scenes about the possibility of deploying an EU naval force to keep arms shipments out of Gaza."

While technically possible, "it is a very difficult task," Heyman said. "This is one of those desperate jobs where both sides will probably hate them for it." The main danger for any EU force, he continued, "would be a breakdown in communications with the Israeli Navy."

"They will have to work out between them very effective rules of engagement and lines of command or it could go drastically wrong," he added.

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