

Hamas-Israel ceasefire holds after night of violence

Palestinian faction says it has agreed to a ceasefire with Israel to end largest flare-up of violence since 2014 war.



A ceasefire agreement between Hamas and Israel appears to be holding following one of the worst days in violence in the Gaza Strip since the 2014 Gaza war.

Hamas said on Wednesday that armed groups in the Gaza Strip had agreed to a deal with Israel following a night of air attacks targeting several Hamas and Islamic Jihad positions in the coastal enclave.

The Israeli government had yet to comment on the offer but Khalil al-Hayya, Hamas's deputy chief in Gaza, said the group was committed to a truce as long as Israel was.

"A number of mediators intervened in the past hours, and an agreement was reached to return to a ceasefire in Gaza", Hayya said in a statement.

Hours earlier, a Hamas-affiliated Twitter account announced that the group had agreed to return to an understanding on a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip so long as the "occupier" did the same.

Al Jazeera's Bernard Smith, reporting from Gaza, said Egyptian security officials had helped broker the deal after Israel warned of "tougher retaliation measures" against the groups' leadership.

"The truce came about after Israel conveyed a message to the Egyptians that if the Palestinian factions didn't stop, Israel would react in a stronger, harder way and target the leadership of those groups.

"It's 10am local time (07:00 GMT), and the ceasefire appears to be sticking for now, it started at 4am local time," he added.

"The Palestinians are projecting this image that they brokered the ceasefire. Israel will not admit that they agreed to one. But - however it's happened - it's worked and kept things quiet for the time being."

Israeli Intelligence Minister Israel Katz sidestepped questions on whether Israel had agreed to a ceasefire, but said it was not interested in an escalation towards war.

"It all depends on Hamas. If it continues [to attack], I don't know what its fate will be," Katz told Israel Radio.

The Israeli army said it struck 60 targets belonging to Palestinian resistance groups after a "barrage of projectiles" were fired from Gaza into southern Israel on Tuesday.

The firing of rockets and mortar rounds came as Islamic Jihad vowed to avenge a deadly attack against its members last week.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas slammed Israel for the burst of violence, accusing it of "escalating tensions".

"Difficult days have passed in the West Bank, Jerusalem and especially in the Gaza Strip. The Israeli occupation launched a fierce aggression on the Gaza Strip today with rockets and aircraft. This indicates that the occupation does not want peace. However, we want peace, and we demand peace".

Debilitating siege

Tuesday's exchange of fire came after weeks of deadly unrest in the enclave.

Since March 30, at least 121 unarmed Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces in protests near the Israeli fence between Gaza and Israel. Palestinians are demanding their right to return to the homes and land their families were expelled from during the establishment of Israel in 1948.

Gaza - a territory of more than two million people - has been under a devastating Israeli-imposed blockade for the past 12 years, which has severely restricted the movement of Palestinians in and out of the territory.

On Tuesday, a group of Palestinians set sail from Gaza in an attempt to breach Israel's naval blockade.

The vessel, carrying patients needing medical care, students and job-seeking university graduates, was later captured by Israeli warships and towed to Israel.

Israel withdrew its troops and settlers from Gaza in 2005 but, citing security concerns, maintains tight control of its land and sea borders, reducing its economy to a state of collapse.

Egypt also restricts movement in and out of Gaza through its border.

US-brokered peace talks have been stalled since 2014, and Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territories have expanded.

Gaza experienced its most significant conflict in 2014 when at least 2,251 Palestinians, most of whom were civilians, were killed. At least 66 Israeli soldiers and six civilians were also killed.

Source: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/hamas-agrees-gaza-ceasefire-israel-reciprocates-180530053108954.html>

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