Israel bombs Gaza-Egypt border

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Israeli warplanes bombed Gaza's border with Egypt early Wednesday morning. The attack was reportedly in response to a remote-control bomb blast at a security fence in the Gaza Strip on Tuesday, which killed an Israeli Defence Forces tracker and wounded three soldiers.

Later that day, the Israeli Air Force fired a missile at a Palestinian militant, Hussein Abu-Shamaya, as he rode his motorbike. A Palestinian farmer was also reported to have been killed when Israeli Defence Forces troops opened fire after the bomb attack.

The assault underscores that, as far as Israel is concerned, the unilateral cease-fire it announced last week means it can resume its incursions into the Gaza Strip as and when it likes.

The cease-fire was implemented following the "Memorandum of Understanding" signed by Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and outgoing US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Focusing on a pledge of US assistance in ending arms smuggling over the Egypt-Gaza border, the memorandum effectively made safeguarding Israeli security by the US and the "international community" a precondition for any resumption of talks on a Palestinian state and gave carte blanche for Israel to resume attacks on Gaza at any time.

Livni declared then, "It is true that even after the fighting ends, we reserve our right to act to defend ourselves against those activities in Gaza, including weapons smuggling and build-up of military capabilities." Appearing before the New York-based World Jewish Congress in Jerusalem on Wednesday, she spoke in the same spirit. "Israel is going to act according to a new equation. We are not going to show restraint anymore," she said. "We need to change the rules of the game until they learn that the rules have changed and the equation has changed."

Livni's remarks were made as the Obama administration dispatched former Senator George Mitchell to the Middle East for negotiations with Israel and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

European Union chief Javier Solana also arrived in the Middle East Tuesday for talks. On Monday, the EU announced emergency aid worth more than $70 million to help rebuild Gaza in the wake of Israel's 22-day bombardment, which killed 1,300 and wounded thousands more.

The EU is the largest global donor to the Palestinians, but its aid pledge comes with strings attached. EU foreign ministers meeting on Sunday with the foreign ministers of Egypt, Jordan, Turkey and the Palestinian Authority made clear that aid delivery depended on the formation of a "consensus" government in Gaza, which means that Hamas must accepts the leading role of Fatah and adopt its stance towards Israel.

"We believe that Palestinian reconciliation behind President Mahmoud Abbas is fundamental to progress," said Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg, whose country holds the EU's rotating presidency.

Speaking on a tour of Gaza, EU humanitarian aid chief Louis Michel claimed that Hamas bore "overwhelming responsibility" for the devastation of Gaza and warned there would be no dialogue with the "terrorist" movement until it gave up violence and recognised Israel.

EU offers border patrols

Fatah has insisted that rebuilding monies should go through its Palestinian National Authority. PNA Foreign Minister Riad al-Malki said, "There is only one Palestinian National Authority. It is solely legitimate, chosen by the people and headed by President Mahmoud Abbas, and that authority not only has authority in the West Bank, but also has authority in the Gaza Strip."

In truth, Fatah has little authority in Gaza, especially after it stood by while Israel bombarded the strip. But some European leaders hope that Hamas, with Arab pressure and the promise of aid, could be made to cede to Fatah.

Egypt is currently brokering talks to this end. Talks were held between a Hamas delegation and Egypt's intelligence chief Omar Suleiman on Sunday. Afterwards, Egyptian

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Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit said he hoped a February 28 international donors' conference on Palestinian reconstruction would facilitate a "government of national reconciliation."

Urging the EU to move quickly on its pledges, he said, "We need to force the Israelis to negotiate and also tell them to open crossings and to give Palestinians a chance to live in a normal way."

Israel has continued to refuse to deal with Hamas. During discussions on January 21, Livni told EU ministers that "what is needed is a coalition against terror and not something that ends by an agreement with them."

Both Israel and Egypt continue to block all but the most essential supplies into the Gaza Strip. Cassandra Nelson of the relief agency Mercy Corps said an EU grant last year to create jobs in light construction had to be amended because cement and steel rods could not be imported. The imposition of similar rules would prevent any effective rebuilding of the territory.

The *New York Times* reported Wednesday that "truckloads of humanitarian aid are sitting in Egypt," unable to cross the border due to Israeli and Egyptian restrictions.

Israel insists that Egypt must effectively police its border with Gaza, especially the tunnels.

The US is currently engaged in navy patrols of the Red Sea to prevent weapons smuggling and has also sent the Army Corps of Engineers to the Egyptian Sinai desert with advanced machinery to help locate tunnels on the Gaza border. Egyptian troops have been undergoing training with the equipment in Texas.

The EU has also said it will expand its monitors on the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt, which was closed in 2007. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier committed five German border experts to help patrol the crossing, and several European countries, including France and Britain, have offered naval vessels to patrol the Red Sea.

Egypt has so far formally ruled out the stationing of foreign powers on its soil. Referring to the Israeli-US Agreement, Foreign Minister Gheit said the two countries can "do what they wish with regard to the sea or any other country in Africa," but "when it comes to Egyptian land, we are not bound by anything except the safety and national security of the Egyptian people and Egypt's ability to protect its borders."

Calls for European "clout"

There is growing dissatisfaction within ruling circles over Europe's tail-ending of Washington in the Middle East. Writing in the *Guardian*, former Conservative Party chairman and European Commissioner Chris Patten opined, "If Europe is to write more cheques," it should "insist on some political movement."

"It is time to question Europe's historic role of financing the failure of policies laid down in Israel and the US," Patten suggested, calling for support for a Palestinian unity government.

Toby Vogel, on *EuropeanVoice.com*, complained that the "EU's Middle East policy appears indistinguishable from that of the US."

"It may be the main backer of the Palestinian authority and the leading supplier of humanitarian aid to Gaza, but that has not translated into real diplomatic clout."

France especially has been attempting to mark out a more assertive European stance in recent weeks, utilising the period of transition from the Bush presidency to Obama. President Nicolas Sarkozy has said he intends to host an international conference in Paris in the coming months to "advance stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks."

On Tuesday, Sarkozy met with the father of captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit—who holds dual Israeli-French citizenship—at the Elysee Palace. Sarkozy had invited Noam Shalit to Paris during his visit to Israel last week to update him on the "latest developments in the diplomatic efforts to secure his son's release."

According to reports, France had pressed the EU foreign ministers meeting for a resolution that would have enabled the reopening of the Israeli-Gaza crossing points without the presence of Fatah representatives.

Haaretz correspondent Barak Ravid reported that Israel, which regarded it as a softening of the EU line on the exclusion of Hamas, had brought "intense diplomatic pressure" to bear to block the move.

"The Czech Republic, the current holder of the EU presidency, together with Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, worked together to push the French initiative off the agenda," he reported.

The meeting also ruled out a call from Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb for the EU to consider revising its ban on direct talks with Hamas, which it, following the US, has so far proscribed as a terrorist organisation.

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