Israel rejects calls to lift Gaza blockade

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Indirect negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian delegations recommenced yesterday in Egypt after both sides agreed to a further 72-hour Gaza Strip ceasefire, which came into effect on Monday at midnight.

The Israeli bombardment of the densely populated Palestinian enclave resumed last Friday after the previous truce expired with no agreement in talks over an end to the month-long war. At least seven Palestinians died on Sunday, bringing the total death toll to at least 1,921, most of them civilians.

Hamas, the ruling party in the Gaza Strip, is calling for an end to the crippling Israeli-Egyptian blockade of the territory. Hamas representatives are also demanding the right to establish an international airport and harbour, in order to end Gaza's dependence on border crossings controlled by Israel and Egypt.

Israel and Egypt have rejected any immediate, significant easing of border restrictions on people and goods, but suggested that the blockade could be partially lifted if the border crossings were policed by the Palestinian Authority headed by Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas. Both countries are seeking to marginalise Hamas, which has controlled the Gaza Strip since 2007, when relations with Fatah broke down.

The blockade has had a devastating impact on the Gazan economy, particularly after the Egyptian military ousted President Mohammad Morsi in last year's coup and suppressed his Muslim Brotherhood-led government. The Cairo junta, which is hostile to the Islamist Hamas, sealed the Gaza-Egypt border and destroyed an estimated 95 percent of cross-border tunnels into Egypt.

"One day we had been sitting having great conversations with Morsi and his government and then suddenly, the door was shut," Ghazi Hamad, Hamas's deputy foreign minister commented last month. Cut off by Egypt in the south, Israel on the east and north, and the Israeli navy by sea, the Gaza Strip was transformed into a ghetto dependent on limited humanitarian supplies and with no means for Palestinians to leave.

Exports have collapsed to an estimated 2 percent of the pre-2007 level. According to a Gazan business association, the economic bans, combined with the destruction of factories in Israeli attacks, have reduced the number of manufacturing businesses from 2,400 to 400 over the past eight years. Unemployment is estimated at up to 50 percent. Unable to pay some 40,000 government workers in Gaza, Hamas cut a deal with Abbas to form a unity government in April in a bid to alleviate the financial crisis.

A month of relentless Israeli attacks by air, land and sea has vastly compounded the hardships confronting the Palestinian population of 1.8 million. Israeli strikes destroyed Gaza's only power station on July 29. Pumping stations, power lines and water pipes have all been badly damaged. Ten of the 26 hospitals, or 40 percent of the hospital beds in Gaza, have been shut. An estimated 10,000 homes have been destroyed and more than 200,000 people are still in UN-run shelters, with many more staying with friends and relatives.

In the northern town of Beit Hanoun, one of the communities inside Israel's three-kilometre, "free fire zone," 70 percent of homes are "uninhabitable," according to Mayor Mohammed al-Kafarna. "Basically the town is unliveable. There is no power, water or communications. There are not the basics for life," he told the *Guardian* .

Israel has blocked the entry of basic building materials such as cement into the Gaza Strip, claiming that these would be used to reconstruct Hamas's tunnel network destroyed by the Israeli military.

Having created this human catastrophe, the Israeli government is now intent on exploiting it to extract concessions from Hamas. While Hamas has flatly rejected Israel's demand for the "demilitarisation" of

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the Gaza Strip—that is the disarming of Palestinian militants—it has indicated that it would be willing to hand over control of the Rafah crossing into Egypt to Palestinian Authority police. Israel will undoubtedly demand far more, including a greater role for the Palestinian Authority in suppressing resistance to Israel, as the Palestinian Authority has already done in the West Bank.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered the pulling back of the Israeli army from Gaza last week and gave the go-head for a ceasefire and talks amid widespread international revulsion and anti-Israeli protests. However, the narrow limits on Israel's negotiating position were laid out by Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, the main advocate for talks within the cabinet.

In an interview last Friday with Israel's Channel 2, Livni outlined a multi-stage plan based on the marginalisation of Hamas and recognition of the Palestinian Authority as the sovereign ruler over the Gaza Strip. She flatly rejected Hamas's demand to be permitted to build a seaport and international airport in Gaza, and to establish secure land links to the West Bank. "We are not going to give them a prize for their attacks," she said.

At the same time, Livni, often described as a "moderate" or "centrist," fully backed the resumption of Israeli military operations. "If Hamas continues to shoot at Israel, all options are on the table," she warned. By "all options," Livni is undoubtedly referring to those proposed by cabinet members such as extreme right-wing Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who reportedly pushed for a complete Israeli military takeover of the Gaza Strip and the destruction of Hamas, but was overruled by Netanyahu.

Immense pressure will now be brought to bear on the Palestinian delegation in Cairo by Egypt and Israel, supported by the US, to accept Israel's demands. If that fails, the Israeli military will return to its murderous assault on Gaza, aimed at breaking the resistance of the Palestinian people to the Israeli occupation.

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