

Indefinite ceasefire commences in Gaza

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An open-ended ceasefire came into force in Gaza yesterday at 7 p.m. local time after Israel and the Palestinian factions signed off on a deal brokered in Cairo by the Egyptian junta. While the ceasefire holds out the prospect of an end to Israel's one-sided war on the densely-populated enclave, it remains tentative, with the Israeli military poised to resume action at the slightest pretext.

The truce, announced by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, was greeted with jubilation and a sense of relief in Gaza where the population has been subjected to sustained attack since July 8. At least 2,143 Palestinians are dead, the vast majority civilians, and around 11,000 wounded. The death toll includes at least 490 children. By contrast, most of the 70 Israeli dead were soldiers, with six civilians killed by short-range rockets and mortars fired by Palestinian militants.

After the previous ceasefire collapsed on August 19, Israel intensified its attacks, carrying out more than 350 air strikes and killing at least 112 Palestinians. Since Saturday, five major high-rise residential blocks and shopping complexes have been reduced to rubble. Yesterday, the Israeli military levelled the 15-story Basha Tower and badly damaged the 13-story Italian Complex. Over the past 50 days, some 17,000 homes have been destroyed and many more damaged. Some half a million people have been forced to live in emergency shelters or with friends and family.

Hamas leaders yesterday claimed a victory, but most of its demands were not met. Israel agreed to a limited easing of its decade-long blockade, by opening border crossings to allow a greater flow of goods, including humanitarian aid and materials required for rebuilding. It also agreed to extend the fishing limit off the Gaza coast from three to six miles and reduce the security buffer that it enforces inside the enclave from 300 to 100 metres.

Under the agreement, however, Hamas was forced to

concede significant powers to the Palestinian Authority (PA) headed by Abbas, which lost control of Gaza in 2007. PA security forces, which are US-trained and collaborate with Israel, will police the Gaza side of border crossings and the PA will oversee reconstruction in the enclave.

The Israeli government is clearly seeking to undermine Hamas and boost the authority of Abbas's Fatah faction, which lost the 2006 election to Hamas and is widely regarded as corrupt. Facing a severe financial crisis in Gaza as a result of the blockade enforced by Israel and Egypt, Hamas reached a deal in June to form a unity government with Fatah.

Egypt has proposed a separate agreement with the Palestinian factions to open its Rafah crossing into southern Gaza, but is likely to delay its implementation. The Egyptian junta, which seized power from the Muslim Brotherhood government last year, is hostile to Hamas and collaborated closely with the Obama administration in pushing through the current truce.

Most of the Palestinian demands were put off to future negotiations, which will only commence after a month. These include the construction of a sea port in Gaza, the rebuilding of the Yassar Arafat International Airport, which Israel bombed in 2000, and the unfreezing of funds to pay 40,000 police, government workers and other administrative staff who have been largely unpaid since late last year. Hamas and Fatah are also calling for the release of Palestinian prisoners.

Under the ceasefire agreement, Gaza will remain an embattled enclave, surrounded on all sides by hostile forces, its economy crippled by a continuing economic blockade, and subject to the constant threat of Israeli military intervention. Mark Regev, a spokesman for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, said further talks over Gaza's future would only take place if there was "a total end to terror attacks from Gaza."

While Israel conceded very little in agreeing to the

ceasefire, the deal will intensify its internal political crisis. Netanyahu is under fire from extreme right-wing elements within his cabinet and ruling coalition for pulling back from Gaza and failing to militarily destroy Hamas.

Netanyahu evaded a bitter debate in his cabinet by not putting the ceasefire agreement to a vote. Three prominent cabinet figures—Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, Economy Minister Naftali Bennett and Internal Security Minister Yitzhak Aharonovich—each expressed opposition to the deal.

Netanyahu faces dissent within his own Likud Party. Danny Danon, who was sacked as deputy defence minister last month, declared: “Any agreement that leaves the Hamas regime in place and does not disarm the terrorists in Gaza should be utterly rejected by the state of Israel.”

At the same time, Netanyahu confronts opposition from Israelis repulsed by the brutality of Israeli military operations and hit by new economic burdens from the war. A poll for Israel’s Channel 2 put the prime minister’s support at 38 percent, down from 63 percent in a similar survey just three weeks ago.

Public hostility to the Israeli invasion has grown. Last week, an estimated 10,000 Israelis took part in a protest rally under the banner, “Changing direction: toward peace, away from war.” Such opposition finds no expression in the Israeli political establishment, which has backed the war to the hilt. According to the Scoop Media report, many of those attending the rally were critical of so-called left-wing organisations, such as Peace Now and Meretz, for refusing to support previous anti-war demonstrations.



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