



Political

update: Hamas reportedly agrees to Egyptian initiative for a ceasefire agreement with Israel — 14 January

Key points:

- Reports are circulating that Hamas accepts Egypt proposal for Gaza truce (19.55)
- British Prime Minister makes fresh efforts to secure ceasefire
- UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon arrives in Cairo and urges for immediate ceasefire
- Three rockets fired from Lebanon into northern Israel causing no injuries; Israel responds with artillery fire
- Palestinian medics state that the death toll has passed 1,000; Israeli death toll is at 13
- The Israeli Defence Force will increase humanitarian flow of aid by opening more crossing points
- Israel intercepts Iranian ship destined for the Gaza Strip (14 January)

Latest developments – diplomacy

- Hamas is willing to accept an Egyptian initiative for a ceasefire agreement with Israel, after having added some amendments, the Saudi-owned Arabic language Al Arabiya TV reported Wednesday (14 January) evening. Hamas has agreed to abide by the 2005 agreement which calls for Palestinian Authority forces to man the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt under the supervision of European observers. Hamas conditioned the agreement with Israel on the immediate withdrawal of the Israel Defense Force from the Gaza Strip. It has been reported that a press conference will be held on the outcome of negotiations later in the evening. Details may have changed in secret negotiations held with Egypt: "There are still points of difference on the initiative and these points have not been resolved so far," Osama Hamdan, the Hamas representative in Lebanon, said in an interview broadcast on Al Jazeera television.
- Downing Street announced today that Prime Minister Gordon Brown made fresh efforts to secure a ceasefire in Gaza. Brown was described as being "deeply troubled" by the mounting death toll, and on Tuesday night telephoned his Israeli counterpart Ehud Olmert and Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak to press for the terms of the UN Security Council resolution to be met. A Number 10 spokesman said last night that:

"The situation in Gaza is of increasing concern, and the Prime Minister has been deeply troubled by the scenes of terrible suffering. He has urged the Israeli Government to fully respect their international humanitarian commitments, and is calling on Arab leaders to say more clearly that Hamas must disarm." (13/01/09)

Today Brown will be speaking to President Abbas, before taking forward proposals with President Niocolas Sarkozy and Chancellor Angela Merkel.

- UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has met Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo. The visit is the start of various diplomatic meetings Ban is scheduled to attend in Israel, the occupied Palestinian territories, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, Syria and Kuwait. It is reported that he will not have direct contact with Hamas fighters, and will not visit Gaza until a ceasefire is implemented. In a press conference immediately following the meeting, Ban stressed the urgent need for a ceasefire:

"I have been urging in the strongest possible terms: all sides must stop fighting now. We do not have any time to lose. Then we can discuss and elaborate terms and conditions." (14/01/09)

Ban also urged the international community to support the Egyptian peace plan to bring about a staged ceasefire, asking them to "fully rally behind this initiative, now."

- Israeli officials said on Tuesday that Senior Israeli Defense Ministry Official Amos Gilad will travel to Cairo for talks with Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Suleiman only when the Egyptians have Hamas' approval for their ceasefire proposal. The meeting was initially expected to take place last Monday, but has been continually postponed ever since, and the trip may not now take place until Thursday.
- According to media reports, a political divide is forming between Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and pro-ceasefire ministers such as Defense Minister Ehud Barak and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni. In contrast to his colleagues, Olmert believes the military operation still has not achieved its goals and is reportedly delaying meeting with senior ministers to allow the military operations in Gaza to continue.
- Senior defence establishment officials believe that Israel should strive to reach an immediate cease-fire with Hamas, and not expand its offensive against the Palestinian Islamist group in Gaza. During meetings of the Israel Defense Forces General Staff and of the heads of the state's other security branches, officials have said that Israel achieved several days ago all that it possibly could in Gaza. The officials expressed reservations about launching the third phase of Operation Cast Lead, preferring for it to remain a threat at this stage.

Latest developments – rockets attacks from Lebanon against northern Israel

- Three Katyusha rockets were fired from Lebanon on Wednesday (14 January) morning at northern Israel. This is the second such rocket attack from southern Lebanon in less than a week. There are no reports of damage or injuries. Israel Police confirmed that one rocket reached Israel, with the other two exploding within Lebanon.
- The Israeli army retaliated by firing 8 artillery shells at the assumed location of the Katyusha launchers.
- According to Lebanese officials, Israeli helicopter gunships flew reconnaissance missions along the heavily protected border as Lebanese troops and UN peacekeepers sent out patrols. Hours after the initial morning exchange, three more Grad rockets that were set to be fired were discovered and dismantled by Lebanese troops.

Latest developments – humanitarian situation

- The IDF plans to open more crossing points into Gaza starting from today (14 January). Previously, transfers of food, medical supplies and animal feed have been limited to the Kerem Shalom crossing, which was designed as a minor crossing point.

According to spokesman for the Coordinator of Activities in the Territories Maj. Peter Lerner, the IDF has also begun pumping fuel through Kerem Shalom to provide an alternative to Nahal Oz, and plans to open Erez for cargo (previously only used for medical emergencies).

- Prime Minister Ehud Olmert appointed Social Welfare and Social Services Minister Isaac Herzog to coordinate between the various Government bodies regarding the humanitarian assistance to the civilian population in the Gaza Strip on Wednesday (14 January). The decision was made in order to increase the humanitarian efforts in this area.
- 2,310 tons of aid were transferred on Tuesday (13 January). 1,028 truckloads (24,356 tons) of humanitarian aid have been delivered to Gaza since the beginning of the operation.

Latest developments – Iranian boat turned away by Israeli Navy

- The Israeli Navy intercepted an Iranian ship purportedly carrying 2000 tons of medicine, food and clothing destined for Gaza.
- Israeli military officials said the ship was prevented from reaching Gaza as part of the general naval blockade, aimed at preventing the smuggling of arms to Gaza and not because the boat was from Iran.
- Israeli officials said an Israeli naval ship approached the vessel, conveyed by radio the message of the blockade of Gaza and told the crew they would not be allowed in. Israeli officials reported there was no clash.

Latest developments – Hamas' attacks against southern Israel and Fatah members

- 25 rocket and mortar shells were fired into Israel on Tuesday (13 January), with no reported injuries.
- Early on Wednesday (14 January), IDF paratroopers killed a Palestinian suicide bomber who attempted to detonate his explosives belt near them. IDF Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi discussed the threat of such bombings on Tuesday, saying that Hamas militants have been dressing up as IDF soldiers in uniform in efforts to carry out suicide missions against Israeli troops in Gaza.
- Israel's UN Ambassador Gabriela Shalev has filed a complaint on Tuesday (13 January) evening to UN General-Secretary Ban Ki-Moon and the Security Council over Hamas' use of Palestinian civilians. According to Shalev, a Hamas war room was discovered beneath the largest hospital in Gaza. Shalev also said Hamas has operated out of mosques, schools and private homes while using civilians as human shields.

Latest developments – Operation Cast Lead, Day 19

- IDF forces, including infantry, tanks, combat engineers, artillery and intelligence, continued to operate throughout the Gaza Strip with the assistance of the Israel Air Force and the Israeli Navy. The IDF continues to enforce the naval blockade in the area.
- The IAF attacked approximately 60 targets in Gaza overnight, including Hamas police headquarters in Gaza City, an area rigged with explosive devices intended for detonation against IDF forces, five rocket launching sites, including a squad of gunmen who fired mortar shells into Israel. Three gunmen were identified to have been hit. Also amongst the targets were approximately 35 weapons smuggling tunnels in the southern Gaza Strip.

- Six soldiers were wounded in ground operations throughout the night: in one incident, two officers were moderately wounded and an officer and two soldiers were lightly wounded when they were fired upon by gunmen. Soldiers returned fire and hit the assailants. Another soldier was lightly wounded in a second incident.

Background

- Since 2001, over 8,500 rockets and mortars have been fired at Israel from Gaza. This has resulted in the deaths of 28 Israelis, Palestinians and foreign workers as well as hundreds more being injured.
- Israel withdrew its military and civilian presence from Gaza in August 2005. Following Israel's withdrawal, Hamas increased its attacks and has since fired over 5,000 rockets and mortars at Israel.
- Israelis have been bombarded by over 800 missiles, rockets and mortars since Hamas rejected the renewal of the six month ceasefire on 19 December 2008.
- Hamas intensified attacks on Israel since 4 November 2008, over a month before the last ceasefire was due to end. Between 19 June, when the ceasefire began, and 19 December, when it came to an end, southern Israel was subjected to 436 rocket and mortar attacks.
- Hamas used the six months of the ceasefire to build up its strength, develop and produce weapons and train militants, preparing for the period after the calm. It has imported longer-range Iranian and Chinese produced Grad-Katuysha rockets and can now call on 15,000 to 20,000 fighters. 900,000 Israelis or 12.5 percent of the population are now in range of Hamas' attacks.
- Thousands of Gazans every year are granted passage into Israel for emergency and routine medical treatment. In 2007, 7,226 exit permits were issued for patients and another 7,922 for their family member escorts from Gaza. According to the World Health Organisation and the Israeli Coordination and Liaison Administration, 4,900 patients received permits to enter Israel for medical treatment in 2006. This upward trend continued in 2008. Between 1 January and 17 July 2008, 10,428 permits were issued.
- Between the beginning of the ceasefire on 19 June 2008 and Hamas' escalation of rocket fire in November 2008, Israel was allowing close to 4,000 trucks of aid a month to Gaza.