

Israel-Hamas war

Israel has 'basically signed on' to a ceasefire, US official says

Obstacles to a deal remain as US begins dropping aid into Gaza



Joe Biden ordered airdrops of humanitarian assistance into Gaza © REUTERS

Felicia Schwartz in Washington and **Mehul Srivastava** in Tel Aviv MARCH 2 2024

Israel has “basically signed on” to a six-week ceasefire that would be used to facilitate a second round of swaps of Israeli hostages for Palestinian prisoners, a senior US administration official said.

Several hurdles remain before any deal can be agreed, though, including the hostage-to-prisoner ratio that Hamas and Israel agree and a long-standing Hamas demand that a permanent ceasefire come into place after almost five months of war between the Jewish state and the Palestinian militant group.

In a sign of the process’s sluggish progress, an Arab diplomat said on Saturday that further technical negotiations could take place in Cairo as early as Sunday. An Israeli official said it was awaiting confirmation of how many hostages remain alive, and the identities of those Hamas is willing to release, before sending a delegation to Cairo.

“The ball is in the court of Hamas,” the US official said. “There will be a six-week ceasefire in Gaza starting today if Hamas agrees to release the defined category of vulnerable hostages . . . the sick, the wounded, elderly and women.”

Talks have been complicated by a vague announcement by Hamas on Friday that as many as 70 of the 130 or so hostages it is said to be holding had been killed by

Israeli air strikes and shelling.

If confirmed, that is almost twice the Israeli estimate for how many hostages are dead, and sharply changes the contours of the negotiations.*

Israel declared war on the Islamist group after a cross-border raid by Hamas on October 7, where 1,200 people were killed and about 240 — including soldiers and civilians — were taken hostage, according to Israeli authorities.

More than 100, including some foreigners, were released in a swap in late November, which also took place under the cover of a ceasefire, accompanied by a surge in humanitarian aid.

Israel's military campaign has killed more than 30,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, according to Gazan health authorities. Families of the hostages have repeatedly warned that Israeli air strikes endangered the lives of their loved ones.

US President Joe Biden has sought to broker a ceasefire before the holy month of Ramadan, which starts on March 10, as a first step in a more lasting end to the conflict.

He ordered airdrops of humanitarian assistance into the besieged enclave, after [criticising Israel](#) for not doing enough to facilitate the distribution of aid.

The airdrops will continue in the coming days and are part of “flooding of the zone” with humanitarian assistance to make it less susceptible to looting, because more aid inside Gaza will make it less valuable, a second US official said.

The US airdrops started on Saturday, two days after at least 100 Palestinians were killed in chaotic scenes near a food convoy in northern Gaza.

Israeli officials said that while they used live ammunition as warning shots near the same location after its troops felt threatened, the deaths were caused by a stampede, or aid trucks rolling over people.

Health officials in Gaza described the killings as a massacre by Israeli troops.

**The story has been amended to clarify the estimates refer to the number of hostages who had died*

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