

Israel-Hamas war

Israel defence minister seeks to widen war goals to include the north

Yoav Gallant says 'safe return' of 60,000 Israelis displaced due to Hizbollah attacks should also be a goal



Ami Saada, right, looks out through his broken window after a rocket fired by Hizbollah from Lebanon hit his house on August 25 in Acre, northern Israel © Getty Images

James Shotter in Jerusalem and **Heba Saleh** in Cairo YESTERDAY

Israel's defence minister said on Thursday that the country must "expand" its war goals to include ensuring that people displaced by rocket attacks from the Lebanese militant group Hizbollah can return to their homes.

Israel and Hizbollah have been exchanging almost daily fire since the Iran-backed group began shooting rockets at Israel in support of Hamas the day after the Palestinian militant group launched its October 7 attack on Israel.

The attacks have stopped short of erupting into an all-out war but have escalated steadily, with Israel and Hizbollah on Sunday in their biggest exchange of fire since they fought a 34-day war in 2006.

Speaking at the start of a meeting with military officials, Yoav Gallant said he would propose to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that enabling the more than 60,000 Israelis who have been displaced by the exchanges with Hizbollah to return home should become one of the [war](#) goals.

"Our mission on the northern front is clear: to ensure the safe return of northern communities to their homes," Gallant said. "In order to achieve this goal, we must expand the goals of the war, and include the safe return of Israel's northern residents

to their homes.”

Israel’s war goals have been focused on destroying Hamas and securing the release of the roughly 105 Israeli hostages it still holds in [Gaza](#). However, Gallant’s comments underscore how officials are increasingly turning their attention to Hizbollah, which has said it will continue firing at Israel until there is a ceasefire in Gaza.

Israeli officials have said they are prepared to take military action against Hizbollah if they are unable to reach a deal to return the displaced Israelis to their homes via diplomatic means.

Months of talks mediated by the US, Egypt and Qatar to secure a ceasefire in Gaza and the release of the hostages have failed to produce a deal, with Israel and Hamas at loggerheads over critical details.

However, the World Health Organisation said on Thursday that Israel and Hamas had separately agreed to three brief humanitarian pauses next week to facilitate the vaccination of 640,000 children against polio after the first known case of the virus in the enclave for 25 years was confirmed last week.

Aid groups have blamed the [re-emergence of the virus](#) on the disruption to child vaccination programmes and the dire sanitation conditions in Gaza, where 10 months of fighting has fuelled a humanitarian catastrophe and devastated the healthcare system.

Some 1.9mn people have been displaced to overcrowded makeshift camps amid piles of rubbish and overflowing sewage, with limited access to clean water and hygiene products.

Richard Peeperkorn, the WHO’s representative for the Palestinian territories, said the three pauses would last three days each. The first would begin on Sunday in central Gaza and would be followed by others in the south and north of the enclave, he said.

He added that 90 per cent vaccination coverage during each round was needed to stop the outbreak and prevent polio from spreading internationally.

An Israeli official said the details of how the pauses would be implemented were not clear but the campaign was due to start on Sunday and would involve pauses of several hours in each location.

Juliette Touma, communications director for UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, which administered vaccines before the war, said the agency would deploy

more than 1,000 health workers to support the campaign.

“UNRWA calls on all parties to commit to these pauses,” she said. “They do not however replace the urgent need for a ceasefire.”

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