

Israel-Hamas war

Israel delays release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners

Hamas freed six hostages as first phase of ceasefire nears end



Israeli hostages Tal Shoham, left, and Avera Mengistu appear on a stage with Hamas gunmen before being handed over to the Red Cross © AP

Mehul Srivastava in London and **Neri Zilber** in Tel Aviv 8 HOURS AGO

Israel said it would delay the release of more than 600 Palestinian prisoners who were due to be freed as part of its ongoing ceasefire with Hamas, casting doubt over the fate of future exchanges.

The group were due to be released on Saturday after Hamas released six Israeli hostages from captivity in Gaza, including two held for almost a decade, as a precarious ceasefire beset by recriminations nears the end of its first phase.

After the six were freed Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office accused Hamas of "repeated violations" including "cynical exploitation of our hostages for propaganda purposes".

"It has been decided to delay the release of terrorists that was planned for yesterday until the release of the next hostages has been assured, and without the humiliating ceremonies," it said in a statement posted on X early on Sunday.

The more than 600 Palestinian prisoners due to be released included hundreds held without charge or trial and 110 serving life or long sentences after being convicted in military prisons for violence against Israelis.

Most of the Israeli hostages were released in separate and elaborately staged

ceremonies in Rafah, southern Gaza, and Nuseirat, central Gaza, to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Avera Mengistu, a 39-year-old Ethiopian-Israeli, and Hisham al-Sayed, a 36-year-old Palestinian Bedouin with Israeli nationality, both described as mentally ill by their families, had been held hostage after wandering into Gaza of their own accord in 2014 and 2015.

Their release came alongside those of Tal Shoham, 40, Eliya Cohen, 27, Omer Shem Tov, 22, and Omer Wenkert, 23, who were captured during the Palestinian militant group's assault on Israel on October 7 2023, from kibbutzim near the border and a music festival.

The men looked pale and thin after more than 500 days of captivity but in better physical condition than some of the hostages released this month.

They were paraded onstage by armed Hamas fighters and appeared under pressure to wave and smile at the gathered crowds, despite repeated appeals by the Red Cross for the handovers to be private and dignified.

Hamas issued a statement "strongly condemning" Israel's decision to delay the releases, describing it as a "clear breach" of the ceasefire deal and a "deliberate attempt" by Netanyahu to undermine the accord.

"We demand that the mediators . . . assume their responsibilities and put pressure on the occupation to implement the agreement and release the prisoners without any delay," the statement added.

The six Israelis were the last of the living hostages to be swapped for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners as part of the first phase of the ceasefire, which is set to end on Thursday with the release of four additional bodies.

The second phase, for which negotiations have yet to begin in earnest, could see a permanent end to 15 months of war in exchange for the release of some 60 or so remaining hostages, who include male soldiers and also many presumed to be dead.

Netanyahu's far-right coalition allies are bitterly opposed to a long-term truce, and have demanded that the military resume its war with Hamas.

The six-week first phase has come close to collapse, prompting interventions from the US, Egypt and Qatar to help keep it on track, after Hamas accused Israel of

withholding permission for humanitarian aid, including heavy equipment to excavate bodies trapped under rubble as well as mobile homes and tents for displaced Palestinians.

In the latest flashpoint, Hamas earlier this week released an unidentified body instead of that of Shiri Bibas, a 32-year-old Israeli mother whose two young children were also captured in the October 7 attacks. Their bodies were released earlier this week.

Late on Friday Hamas released a second body, subsequently identified by Israeli forensic pathologists as Bibas, mother to Kfir and Ariel. Hamas blamed the chaos within the shattered Palestinian enclave for handing over the wrong body.

In Israel the capture of the Bibas family — the children's father was released alive in February in the first stage of the exchanges — has become a symbol both of Hamas's brutality in the attack that triggered the war in Gaza and the failure of Israeli authorities to protect them.

The Israeli military said on Friday that autopsies showed that both children had been murdered during their captivity, rather than killed by an Israeli air strike, as Hamas has said since November 2023.

Despite the fraught first phase of the ceasefire, Israel has dispatched a low-level negotiations team to Cairo for talks on the second stage, but little progress has so far been made. Hamas has indicated its willingness to continue negotiation.

Hamas killed at least 1,200 people in Israel in its cross-border raid on October 7, 2023, and took about 250 hostage, according to local officials. Israel's retaliation has killed nearly 50,000 Palestinians, health officials in Gaza have said, and left the enclave — home to more than 2.3mn Palestinians — in the grip of a humanitarian disaster.

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