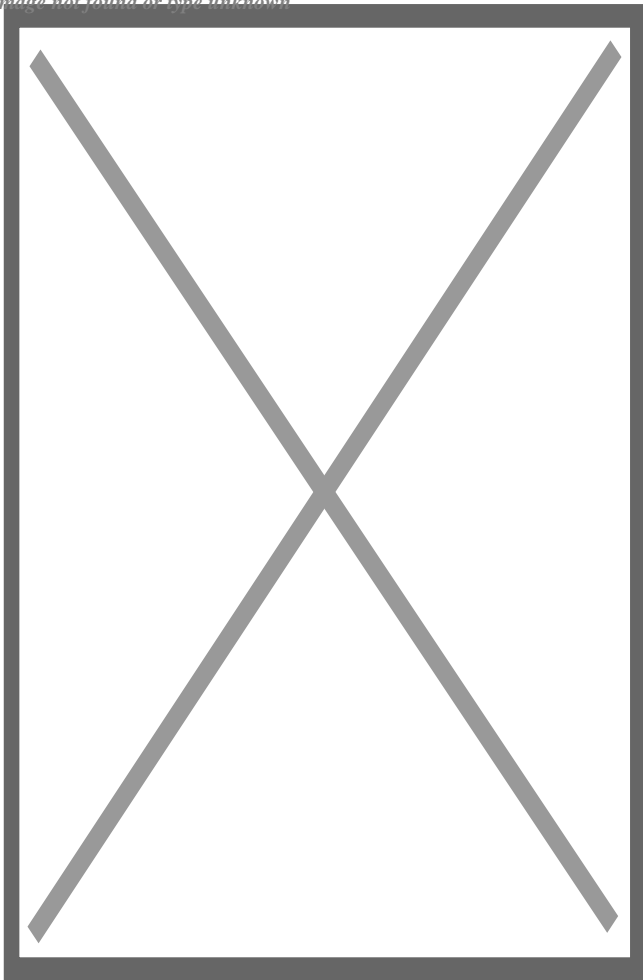


Biden says he can't ask Netanyahu for a ceasefire

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Washington, December 24 (RHC)-- U.S. President Joe Biden says he did not ask Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for a ceasefire in the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza in a telephone call between the two leaders.

"I had a long talk with Netanyahu today [Saturday] and it was a private conversation," Biden told reporters on Saturday.

"I did not ask for a ceasefire," he said, in response to a shouted question.

In a statement later, the White House said Biden and Netanyahu discussed Israel's military campaign in Gaza, including its "objectives and phasing."

Biden "emphasised the critical need to protect the civilian population including those supporting the humanitarian aid operation, and the importance of allowing civilians to move safely away from areas of ongoing fighting," said the statement. "The leaders discussed the importance of securing the release of all remaining hostages."

The call between the two leaders came a day after the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed a resolution calling for the scaling up of aid for Gaza but fell short of calling for a ceasefire or a pause in weeks-long fighting.

The resolution, which demanded "immediate, safe and unhindered" deliveries of life-saving aid to Gaza "at scale", was passed after UNSC members wrangled for days over its wording and toned down some provisions at Washington's insistence.

The U.S. and Russia abstained from the vote, whose impact on the ground, aid groups fear, will be close to nil.

"This resolution has been watered down to the point that its impact on the lives of civilians in Gaza will be nearly meaningless," Avril Benoit, the executive director of Doctors Without Borders, said in a statement.

"The way Israel is prosecuting this war, with US support, is causing massive death and suffering among Palestinian civilians and is inconsistent with international norms and laws," Benoit added. The U.S. also opposed the demand to create a UN monitoring mechanism for aid, assuring Israel would continue to have a role in inspecting deliveries.

Netanyahu on Saturday "expressed his appreciation" for the stance taken by the U.S. at the United Nations, his office said. He also "made it clear that Israel will continue the war until all its goals are completed."

More than 200 killed in 24 hours

Israel has continued to bomb Gaza for nearly 80 days, with more than 200 people killed in the past 24 hours.

Gaza's Health Ministry said the death toll since the start of the attacks rose to 20,258 on Saturday, most of them being women and children.

According to UN estimates, the war has displaced 1.9 million of Gaza's 2.3 million population. The UN has described the situation in Gaza as "beyond catastrophic," with residents struggling to find food, fuel and water, while living in crowded shelters or tents.

In a post on X, the UN relief agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) said it "cannot deliver meaningful aid" while the Israeli bombardment of Gaza continues.

"It is extremely tragic that politics stand in the way of 2.2 million people's survival in Gaza," UNRWA spokesperson Tamara al-Rifai said at a news conference on Saturday.

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