Hamas releases bodies of four Israelis held captive in Gaza

Image not found or type unknown

A large poster acting as the backdrop on the stage showed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with fangs and blood on his face, dripping onto the photos of the four Israelis whose bodies were released.

Khan Younis, February 20 (RHC)-- Hamas has released the bodies of a woman, her two children and an 83-year-old Israeli man who were taken captive during the October 2023 attack. The bodies were handed over to the ICRC in Khan Younis, southern Gaza, on Thursday. Four men carried the four coffins from the stage to the Red Cross vehicles, one at a time.

A large poster acting as the backdrop on the stage showed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with fangs and blood on his face, dripping onto the photos of the four Israelis whose bodies were released.

A spokesperson for the Palestinian group said all four were alive before the "Zionist occupation aircraft deliberately bombed the locations where they were being held."

Hamas said in a statement it "preserved the lives of the occupation prisoners", provided them with what it could, and "treated them humanely, but their [Israel's] army killed them along with their captors."

"Criminal Netanyahu is crying today over the bodies of his prisoners who returned to him in coffins, in a blatant attempt to evade responsibility for their killing in front of his audience," Hamas said.

While addressing the families of the killed Israeli captives, it said: "We would have preferred your sons to return to you alive, but your army and government leaders chose to kill them instead of bringing them back."

The return of the bodies is part of the ceasefire agreement between Hamas and Israel that will also see hundreds of Palestinians released from Israeli jails where a number of them have been kept in detention without any charge or trial.

A Palestinian group said Israel is withholding the remains of at least 665 Palestinians, including several killed in the 1960s and 1970s.

Al Jazeera's Tareq Abu Azzoum, reporting from Khan Younis, said "the site is symbolic for Palestinians because it was a central site for Israeli ground forces during the military operations in the city.

"Preparations started in the early hours of the morning. There are masked fighters with green bands on their heads, armed with rifles and holding different signs with slogans," he added. "The stage was well-prepared with three main banners. One of them talks about the crimes committed by the Israeli forces during their operations in Gaza."

Symbol of 'Israeli stupidity'

The bodies that have been handed over included Israeli infant Kfir Bibas, his four-year-old brother Ariel, their mother Shiri Bibas, and a fourth captive, Oded Lifschitz.

Akiva Eldar, an Israeli author and political analyst, said the return of the bodies marks a "very sad day for all of us".

"These babies became the symbol of I would say Israeli stupidity, fool attitude of the Israeli government," Eldar told Al Jazeera from Tel Aviv. He said Netanyahu is well aware of the poor conditions of the Israeli captives.

"But he has other priorities," said Eldar. "It's kind of a race between the families who are hoping to see their loved ones back home, and Netanyahu, who is desiring to keep his government as long as he can and to buy more time and buy the support of the people on the radical right that believe that land is more precious than the lives of people."

Following the handover, the remains will be moved into coffins and an army rabbi will preside over a short ceremony. They will then be taken into Israel to the national forensic institute to be identified, a process that could take a few hours or even a few days. Only after identification will there be a formal announcement of their deaths and a funeral.

Thursday's handover of bodies will be followed by the return of six living captives on Saturday, in exchange for hundreds more Palestinians, expected to be women and minors detained by Israeli forces in Gaza during the war.

Under the ceasefire deal, Hamas agreed to release 33 captives in exchange for nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners and detainees in the first phase of an agreement intended to pave the way towards ending the war.
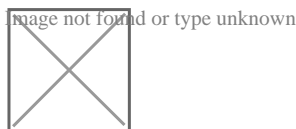
So far, 19 Israeli captives have been released, as well as five Thais who were returned in an unscheduled handover.

Negotiations for a second phase, expected to cover the return of about 60 remaining captives, less than half of whom are believed to be alive, and a full withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Gaza Strip to allow an end to the war, are expected to begin in the coming days.

Israel's genocide in Gaza has killed more than 48,000 Palestinians, with thousands more remaining under the rubble of the bombed-out, besieged enclave.

Radio Habana Cuba