

Hamas says Gaza captives will return in coffins if Israel continues raids

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Israeli demonstrators protest in Tel Aviv to demand a deal with Hamas for the release of captives [Florion Goga/Reuters]

Gaza City, September 3 (RHC)-- The armed wing of the Palestinian group Hamas says captives held in Gaza would return to Israel "in coffins" if Israeli military pressure continues, warning that "new instructions" had been given to its fighters guarding the captives in case Israeli troops approach.

"[Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu's insistence on freeing the captives through military pressure instead of reaching a deal means they will go back to their families in coffins. Their families have to choose between receiving them dead or alive," Abu Obeida, spokesman for the Qassam Brigades, said in a statement on Monday, two days after the bodies of six captives were recovered by Israel.

"Netanyahu and the army are fully responsible for the death of the captives after they intentionally hindered any prisoners' exchange deal," it said.

The statement from the Qassam Brigades came shortly after Netanyahu said the six captives whose bodies were recovered from a tunnel in southern Gaza's Rafah area had been "executed" by Hamas.

"I ask for your forgiveness for not bringing them back alive," Netanyahu said during a televised news conference earlier on Monday as protests over the deaths continued for a second day in Israel. "We were close, but we didn't succeed. Hamas will pay a very heavy price for this," he added.

Senior Hamas official Izzat al-Risheq said the six captives were killed in Israeli air strikes.

Meanwhile, protests in Israel over the deaths of the captives continued with angry demonstrators saying they could have been returned alive if Netanyahu's government had signed a ceasefire with Hamas.

However, political analyst Akiva Eldar told Al Jazeera that a nationwide strike in Israel on Monday and rising public anger will not make a real difference to end the war in Gaza and free the captives.

"It seems that for Netanyahu, the alternative – which is his personal, political and personal life – is more important than the lives of the Israeli captives," Eldar said, adding that despite a large number of protesters, "the Israeli right and radical right" who support the government "have the upper hand".

"The government and the prime minister are now on the defensive," Ori Goldberg, an expert on Israeli politics, told Al Jazeera. "This is about momentum now."

Meanwhile, U.S. President Joe Biden also said Netanyahu was not doing enough to secure a deal for the release of the captives. Speaking to reporters at the White House on Monday, Biden was asked whether he thought Netanyahu was doing enough to reach a deal. Biden said: "No." He did not elaborate.

Months of stop-start negotiations mediated by the United States, Qatar and Egypt have so far failed to reach an accord on a Gaza ceasefire proposal laid out by Biden in May.

Hamas wants an agreement to end the war and get Israeli forces out of Gaza while Netanyahu says the war can only end once Hamas is defeated.

Alon Pinkas, a former Israeli ambassador and government adviser, told Al Jazeera that it is Netanyahu who "absolutely has no interest in a hostage deal or ceasefire." "Those who are shocked and devastated and angered about what happened should not be surprised because this is exactly what the [Israeli] defence minister [Yoav Gallant] and all of us were warning would happen," Pinkas said.

"His [Netanyahu's] and only his reluctance to engage in a deal is what made all this happen."



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