

Israel's Netanyahu announces expanded war goals to include Lebanon border

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Tel Aviv, September 17 ((RHC))-- Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said his goals for the war in Gaza have expanded to include enabling Israelis who have fled areas near the Lebanese border to return to their homes.

There has been almost daily cross-border fire between Israeli forces and the Iran-backed Lebanese armed group Hezbollah since Israel began its war on Gaza nearly a year ago.

The exchanges have forced tens of thousands of people on both sides from their homes and threatened to ignite a wider regional conflict. The decision to include “the safe return of the residents of the north to their homes” was approved during an overnight meeting of Netanyahu’s security cabinet, his office said in a statement on Tuesday.

The decision comes a day after Israel’s Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant told a visiting United States envoy that “military action” was the “only way left to ensure the return of Israel’s northern communities”.

Hezbollah officials have said the group would stand down if a ceasefire was reached in Gaza, but Gallant warned that time was “running out”.

Months of negotiations and shuttle diplomacy have failed to secure a truce to end fighting that began on October 7 after Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israel killing at least 1,139 people and taking more than 200 captive. The Israeli assault has killed more than 41,000 Palestinians and injured more than 95,000.

The ceasefire will be a key focus of discussions when US Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrives in Egypt later on Tuesday.

State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said the US was working “expeditiously” on a new proposal that “secures the release of all hostages, alleviates the suffering of the Palestinian people, and helps establish broader regional security”.

Netanyahu has publicly rejected US assessments that the deal is nearly complete and has insisted on an Israeli military presence on the Egypt-Gaza border.

Mounting international and domestic pressure has failed to persuade him to agree to a captive release deal that has wide support from the Israeli public.

Along Israel’s northern border with Lebanon, Hezbollah claimed “dozens” of attacks on Israeli positions on Monday, and Israel’s military said it struck “terrorist” targets in Lebanon. “The possibility for an agreement is running out as Hezbollah continues to tie itself to Hamas,” Gallant told visiting US envoy Amos Hochstein, a Defense Ministry statement said.

Netanyahu later told Hochstein that he seeks a “fundamental change” in the security situation on Israel’s northern border.

Hezbollah deputy chief Naim Qassem said on Saturday that his group had “no intention of going to war”, but if Israel does “unleash” one, “there will be large losses on both sides”.

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