

Trump says hell to pay if captives in Gaza not released

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A billboard in Israel shows President-elect Donald Trump after he won the U.S. presidential election last month [File: Oded Balilty/The Associated Press]

Washington, December 3 (RHC)-- U.S. President-elect Donald Trump has promised “there will be hell to pay” if captives held in Gaza during Israel’s ongoing war are not released by the time he takes office on January 20th.

The statement on Monday was Trump's most forceful on the deadlocked efforts to bring an end to the war since the November 5th U.S. elections and comes amid reports that he is pushing for a ceasefire to be reached before his second term begins.

In a post on Truth Social, Trump decried "all talk, and no action" about the captives in apparent derision of U.S. President Joe Biden and his administration's inability to broker a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in more than a year of war.

"Please let this TRUTH serve to represent that if the hostages are not released prior to January 20, 2025, the date that I proudly assume Office as President of the United States, there will be ALL HELL TO PAY in the Middle East, and for those in charge who perpetrated these atrocities against Humanity," he said.

"Those responsible will be hit harder than anybody has been hit in the long and storied History of the United States of America. RELEASE THE HOSTAGES NOW!" he wrote.

The post offered no details on what the threat would entail or if it could involve the deployment of the U.S. military. It also did not specify which parties it was referring to but notably referenced only captives held by Hamas without mentioning Palestinian civilians who have borne the brunt of Israeli operations in Gaza.

Both Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the leaders of Hamas have been accused of scuttling talks aimed at ending the fighting for months. Hamas has repeatedly offered to release captives held in Gaza in return for an end to the war, but the Israeli government is adamant that the war will continue until Hamas is totally defeated.

At least one Israeli official was quick to praise Trump's post on Monday. "Thank you and bless you Mr. President-elect @realDonaldTrump," President Isaac Herzog wrote on X. "We all pray for the moment we see our sisters and brothers back home!"

Despite its ambiguity, the promise of escalation represents a departure for Trump as the Middle East policy of his second term continues to take shape.

The former president had campaigned on the broad notion that he would bring about peace in the Middle East, particularly in Gaza, but has offered scant details on how that would be achieved. His "America First" platform has long eschewed further involvement of US forces, assets or funding in conflicts abroad.

At the same time, Trump has voiced support for Israel to "finish the job" in the Palestinian enclave and has long been Netanyahu's preferred leader in the US.

During his first term from 2017 to 2021, Trump was a strong backer of the Zionist regime. He moved the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, the illegally occupied eastern half of which has long been seen as the capital of a future Palestinian state. He recognised Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights in Syria. He forged a series of normalization agreements between Israel and Arab countries, and he allowed for the rapid expansion of Israeli settlements, which are illegal under international law.

This time around, Trump has packed his administration nominations with staunchly pro-Israel officials, including his secretary of state pick Senator Marco Rubio, a rabid defender of Israel's war, and ambassador to Israel pick Mike Huckabee, a vocal supporter of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank who refuses to use its commonly used name, instead referring to "Judea and Samaria."

Still, speaking to the Axios news site last week, Trump ally and Senator Lindsey Graham said the president-elect "is more determined than ever to release the hostages and supports a ceasefire that includes a hostage deal." "He wants to see it happening now," he said.

Graham made the statement just days after Biden announced a ceasefire had been reached between Israel and Hezbollah to end the fighting in Lebanon. As of Monday, that agreement appeared to be on the

brink of collapse with both Hezbollah and Israel accusing the other of violating its terms.

Biden also promised to re-up efforts to reach a long elusive deal to end the fighting in Gaza, where at least 44,466 Palestinians have been killed since Israel launched its war following the October 7, 2023, attacks by Hamas that killed at least 1,139 people in Israel with more than 200 taken captive.

Israeli authorities have said 101 captives remain in Gaza. On Monday, Hamas said a total of 33 captives had been killed since the beginning of the war. On Sunday, Hamas officials told reporters the group's leaders had held talks with Egyptian security officials in a renewed push for a ceasefire. Israeli officials also said Netanyahu was to hold security talks on the matter.

Speaking to CNN, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said he thought the chances of a Gaza ceasefire and hostage deal had improved despite remaining a distant prospect.

"[Hamas] are isolated. Hezbollah is no longer fighting with them, and their backers in Iran and elsewhere are preoccupied with other conflicts," he said. "So I think we may have a chance to make progress, but I'm not going to predict exactly when it will happen. ... We've come so close so many times and not gotten across the finish line."

White House officials have repeatedly made similar assertions without successfully bringing about a ceasefire.

[SOURCE: AL JAZEERA]

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