

Hamas releases three Israeli captives for 369 Palestinian prisoners

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One of the Israeli captives speaks before he is released in Khan Yunis on Saturday.

Gaza resistance fighters have handed three Israeli captives over to the Red Cross in an exchange for 369 Palestinians to be released later in the latest such swap under an ongoing truce deal.

Khan Yunis, February 15 (RHC)-- The Palestinian resistance group Hamas has released three Israeli captives on Saturday. The fighters led the captives onto a stage in Gaza's southern city of Khan Yunis, where the Israelis addressed the crowd before their handover to the Red Cross.

The three men, holding gift bags given and a certificate to mark the end of their captivity, called for the completion of further exchanges of captives under the ceasefire deal.

Sources from Hamas and Islamic Jihad said the resistance groups had deployed about 200 fighters for the handover ceremony.

The release is the sixth since the truce took effect on January 19th. It came after fears last week that the deal was near collapse after Israel's refusal to allow enough humanitarian aid into Gaza.

The Palestinian Prisoners' Club advocacy group said Israel was to release 369 inmates in exchange. Most of them are prisoners from the Gaza Strip who were arrested after the landmark October 7 operation inside southern settlements, it said.

The ceasefire has been under massive strain since US President Donald Trump ignited a firestorm of controversy with his remarks suggesting that the US should "take over" Gaza, remove its people, and "own" the Palestinian territory. He has proposed moving Gaza's 2.3 million residents to Egypt and Jordan, arguing they would be "happy and better off."

Hamas, the governing authority in Gaza, has called Trump's idea "ridiculous and absurd." Arab and other Islamic countries have vociferously rejected the plan.

A joint statement from the heads of Christian churches in al-Quds on Saturday also spoke out against any forced displacement. It said Gazans "who have lived for generations in the land of their ancestors, must not be forced into exile, stripped of... their right to remain in the land that forms the essence of their identity".

Saudi Arabia will host the leaders of Egypt, Jordan, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates on Thursday for a summit on the issue.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, whose country is Israel's top backer, was due to arrive in Israel late Saturday ahead of expected talks with prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the Gaza truce.

For Palestinians, any forced displacement evokes memories of the "Nakba," or catastrophe -- the mass displacement of their ancestors during Israel's creation in 1948.

The stage set up for the release on Saturday bore an illustrated poster depicting the final moments of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar, who was killed while battling Israeli forces to the last in October. It showed the al-Aqsa Mosque visible through a hole in the wall of a destroyed building along with the slogan: "No displacement except to al-Quds."

Hamas released a statement about the release of the three captives, saying the images of al-Quds and al-Aqsa Mosque at the handover site, as well as the large presence of Palestinians there, were a message to Israel and its backers "that they are a red line".

"The release of the sixth batch of enemy prisoners confirms that there is no way to release them except through negotiations and by adhering to the requirements of the ceasefire agreement," it said.

“We say to the whole world: there is no migration except to al-Quds, and this is our response to all the calls for displacement and liquidation launched by Trump and those who support his approach from the forces of colonialism and occupation.”

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