

Hamas says Netanyahu playing dirty games to sabotage Gaza truce deal

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Gaza City, February 22 (RHC)-- Hamas has accused Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of sabotaging the Gaza ceasefire agreement, saying the Israeli government is not engaging in negotiations for the second phase of the deal due to end on March 1st.

Details of the second and third phases of the agreement, though understood to be agreed to in principle, were supposed to be negotiated during the six-week first phase, which has seen the release of Israeli captives in exchange for Palestinian prisoners, the partial withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza and

delivery of aid into the enclave devastated by the 15 months of non-stop Israeli bombardment.

Per the deal, which started on January 19th, the second phase, if finalised, would see the release of all the Israeli captives and a permanent ceasefire.

“We believe that again, these are dirty games from the right-wing government to sabotage and undermine the deal and to send a message of willingness to go back to war,” Basem Naim, a senior member of the Hamas political bureau, told Al Jazeera on Saturday. He said that the Palestinian group that governs Gaza remains committed to the agreement, and has abided by its obligations under the deal.

Basem Naim accused Israel of violating the terms of the deal. “Over 100 Palestinians have been killed in the first phase, much of the agreed humanitarian aid was not allowed into Gaza, and the withdrawal from the Netzarim Corridor [the militarised zone that divides Gaza into north and south] was postponed,” Naim said.

Earlier this month, Israeli officials confirmed to The New York Times that Hamas’s claims against Israel’s violations of the deal were accurate. But the Israeli government has officially denied them.

As part of the ceasefire agreement Israel had agreed to allow 60,000 mobile homes and 200,000 tents into Gaza, but that requirement has not been met. More than 90 percent of Gaza’s 2.4 million Palestinians have been displaced and large swaths of the enclave have been turned into rubble.

Israel has killed more than 48,319 Palestinians since it launched its offensive on October 7, 2023. The Government Media Office in Gaza says more than 13,000 people missing under the rubble are presumed dead. At least 1,139 people were killed and some 240 people were taken captive in the October 7, 2023 attack by Hamas.

Netanyahu has threatened to resume the war on Gaza and has said he is “committed” to a United States proposal to “take over” the enclave and displace its Palestinian residents. Trump now appears to have backed away from that plan.

The Israeli leader has repeatedly said that he is committed to fulfilling the aims of the war in Gaza, including destroying Hamas’s military and governing capabilities in the region. His cabinet is also yet to vote on whether the conditions for the first phase of the Gaza truce deal have been met to transition to the second phase.

On Tuesday, Israeli media reported that Netanyahu has appointed his Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer to lead negotiations on phase two of the ceasefire deal with Hamas. Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar and Mossad chief Dedi Barnea led the previous round of talks.

Political analyst Xavier Abu Eid told Al Jazeera that the assignment of Dermer, a longtime confidant of Netanyahu, to lead the Israeli negotiating team makes an important difference for the future of the talks. “It makes a big difference because Dermer is someone who works for Netanyahu, not for the [Israeli] state,” he said.

Al Jazeera’s Nour Odeh said: “This is the pattern we have seen over the past weeks: Israel negotiates with the U.S., and then comes to Doha or Cairo to speak with the mediators and see what can be worked out.

“On March 1st, phase one of the ceasefire ends. Without a commitment from both sides to continue talking and maintaining calm, everybody is left wondering whether the ceasefire can survive,” she said from the Jordanian capital Amman.

Alon Pinkas, former ambassador and consul general of Israel in New York, told Al Jazeera that the fact that the first phase held does not necessarily bode well for the more challenging second phase.

“The reason is that Netanyahu is not interested in phase two. This phase will include Israeli force reduction in Gaza on day 42, which is a week from now. On day 50, it includes not just a force reduction, but a withdrawal,” Pinkas told Al Jazeera from Tel Aviv.

He said the ceasefire will turn from a cessation of hostilities, as it is known now, to an end to the war, which is not something the Israeli prime minister favors.

“Politically, he can afford neither the withdrawal nor the official end of the war,” he added.

If the Gaza ceasefire breaks down, it would mean that Israeli captives still held in Gaza would remain in the enclave, much to the anger of Israeli society.

Family members of the captives have already protested in Tel Aviv with most relatives and groups advocating for the captives calling on the Israeli government to ensure the deal does not fail.

Al Jazeera’s Odeh said that the families of the Israeli captives have serious doubts about Netanyahu’s commitment to see all the captives freed within the framework of the ceasefire agreement.

“Allies of Netanyahu have made it clear they have absolutely no interest to go to the phase two and they do not believe that Israel should be ending the war. In fact, they are pushing for a return to the bombing of Gaza, some even saying Israel should be annexing parts of the Gaza Strip.

Many in Israel – and within the government – have opposed the ceasefire from the outset, arguing that the war in Gaza, should end only with the complete defeat of Hamas.

The Hamas leader on Saturday said that his group was ready to abandon its governance role in Gaza.

“We have said many times, even before October 7 [2023], that we are willing immediately to leave the governing position in the Gaza Strip and to allow any Palestinian unity government or a technocratic government or any alternative which is decided by Palestinians within the Palestinian consensus,” he said.

Naim said the group welcomes an Egyptian proposal to form a committee tasked with governing all aspects of life in Gaza in coordination with the Palestinian Authority government in Ramallah.

The official added that Hamas was founded as a national Palestinian resistance movement with clear goals, including “to get rid of the occupation, to achieve the Palestinian genuine and national goals of statehood, self-determination and the right to return”.

“We will continue our struggle with all other factions and all our people to achieve these goals through all means, including political and diplomatic means and armed resistance. But to run the daily lives of Palestinians, like health, education and social affairs, we are ready to leave it to a consensus-based solution.”

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