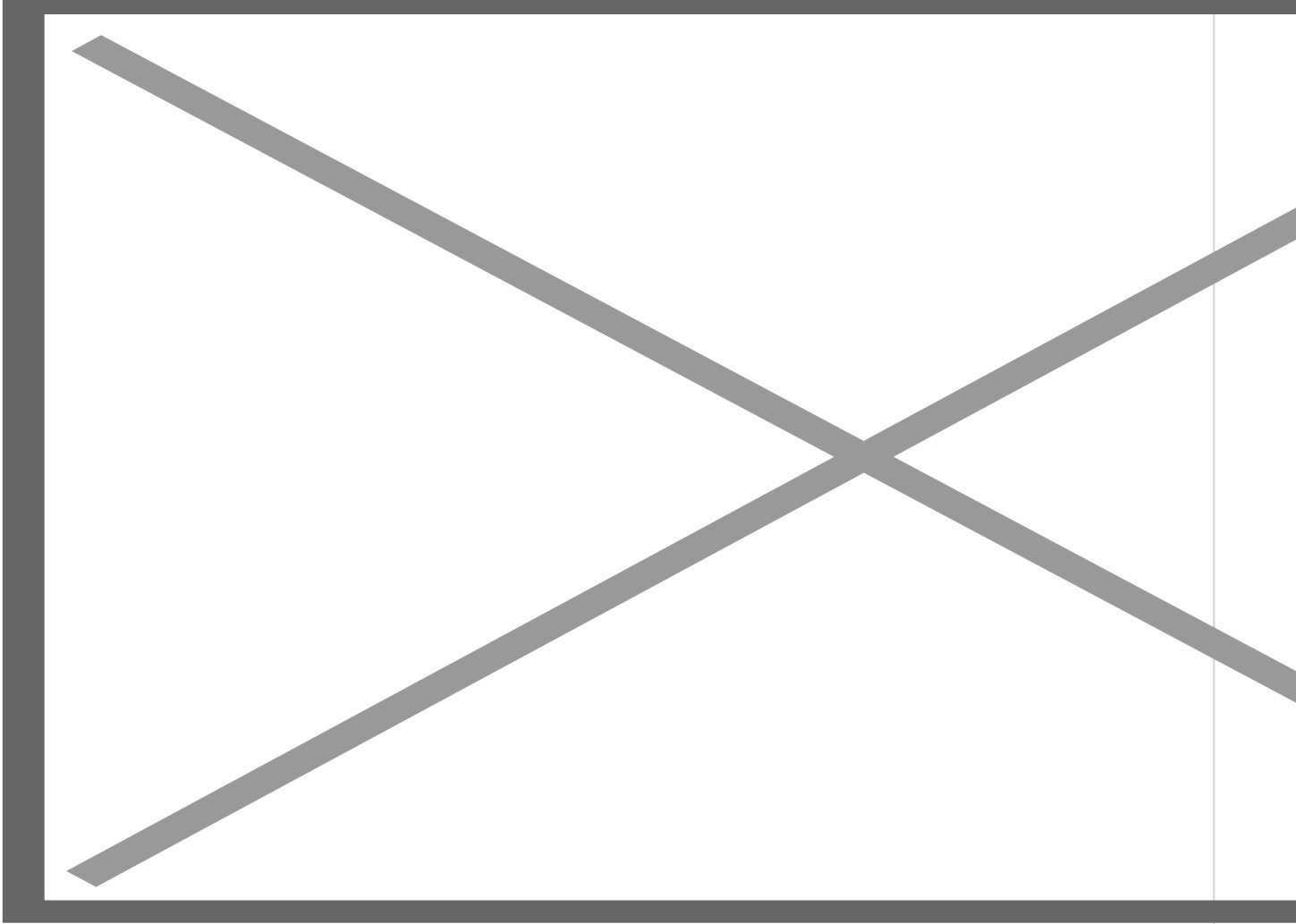


Israel delays release of Palestinian prisoners after Hamas handed over captives

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Ramallah, February 22 (RHC)-- Israel has reportedly postponed the release of hundreds of Palestinian abductees, who were set to be released under a ceasefire deal with Hamas.

Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel has reportedly decided to delay the release of the seventh group of Palestinian prisoners after Hamas handed over six Israeli captives on Saturday.

According to reports, Netanyahu will hold consultations on Saturday night "based on the goal of returning all of our hostages - the living and the dead." A decision will be made regarding the release of 602 Palestinian prisoners following the outcome of the meeting, according to the reports.

The consultations, they said, would explore the next phase of the prisoner exchange and whether to proceed with the release of the rest of the prisoners.

During the first 42-day phase of the ceasefire agreement which took effect on Jan.19, 33 Israeli captives are to be released in exchange for almost 2,000 Palestinian abductees.

Four Israeli captives are still supposed to be released under the first phase of the agreement.

The report of the delay in releasing the prisoners has sparked frustration among the families of Israeli captives, who are now organizing protests to demand that Tel Aviv honor the terms of the ceasefire deal and continue with the planned release of prisoners.

In a Saturday statement, Hamas reiterated that what would guarantee the completion of the future captive-prisoner exchange operations is the full implementation of the Gaza ceasefire deal.

Hamas spokesman Abdul Latif al-Qanou said that Israel needs to remain committed to "the remaining terms of the agreement and the implementation of the humanitarian protocol." He added that "33 days have passed since the first phase started without the occupation completing the full implementation of the terms of the agreement."

Al-Qanou also warned about the "catastrophic" situation in Gaza. He said that the besieged people of Gaza need "mediators to pressure the occupation to implement the humanitarian protocol and provide our people with shelter and relief supplies."

The Palestinian resistance group has previously warned that it could delay the release of Israeli captives if the regime's military violates the ceasefire deal.

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