

*Hamas reasserts demands,
including full Israeli withdrawal
from Gaza*

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Hamas' spokesman Hazem Qassem

Gaza City, March 9 (RHC)-- The Gaza Strip-based Palestinian resistance movement Hamas has reaffirmed its key conditions for advancing negotiations, demanding a full Israeli withdrawal from the coastal sliver, exchange of Zionist captives with Palestinian prisoners, and guarantees that the Israeli regime would not resume its military aggression against the territory.

Spokesman Hazem Qassem made the remarks in a statement on Sunday in response to Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's repeated rejections of a total withdrawal from the territory among other things.

Qassem said discussions with Qatari and Egyptian mediators were ongoing regarding initiation of a second phase of negotiations. He emphasized that Hamas would not agree to an extension of the initial phase of the ceasefire agreement that was implemented between the regime and the movement in January in the hope of ending Tel Aviv's 15-month-plus war of genocide against Gaza.

The first phase of the ceasefire expired recently without extension, featuring release of a number of Zionist captives for thousands of Palestinian prisoners.

Hamas' insistence on not extending the first phase came despite pressure from the regime for its prolongation and release of all the remaining captives in one batch. The group has roundly rejected the demand as "unacceptable," urging implementation of a second phase.

The insistence came after Tel Aviv enacted an unauthorized delay in the release of a group of Palestinian prisoners, despite Hamas' having already handed over a number of the Zionist captives, who were supposed to be exchanged with the prisoners.

Recently, Qassem denounced the regime for evading provisions of the ceasefire agreement, asserting that captives would not be released without Tel Aviv's compliance.

The regime has, in the meantime, blocked the entry of all humanitarian aid deliveries into Gaza in a move aimed at pressuring the group, which has been denounced by human rights organizations as Tel Aviv's using starvation as a weapon of war.

Adding to his Sunday remarks, Qassem again condemned implementation of the inhumane practice, particularly during the holy fasting month of Ramadan. He also said Hamas was prepared to negotiate a captive/prisoner exchange under new terms.

"It is up to the occupation to demonstrate seriousness to the mediators in order to proceed with the next phases of the agreement," he noted, highlighting that the regime's living up to its commitments under the ceasefire deal was essential for progress.

Regarding any U.S. involvement aimed at ensuring release of the American captives, who were being held in Gaza, the spokesman said Hamas had "no issue" meeting with American representatives "as we understand that they have leverage over the occupation."

On Wednesday, the White House confirmed a report saying that the United States had engaged in direct negotiations with the Hamas.

President Donald Trump's administration dispatched Adam Bohler, Washington's point man on American captives held overseas, to discuss the fate of the country's captives, who are held in Gaza, said White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt.

The confirmation, observers say, signals an acknowledgment of Hamas' role in shaping the future of Gaza. Qassem, however, made it clear that any release of Zionist captives holding US citizenship would only occur within the framework of a comprehensive agreement.



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