

Patrolling Egypt-Gaza border at heart of truce talks

AFP, Jerusalem

How to prevent arms smuggling along the porous border between Gaza and Egypt is at the heart of talks that Cairo is conducting on ending Israel's deadly war on Hamas, officials say.

Israel has repeatedly made clear that it would not stop its deadly offensive on Hamas in Gaza until it received guarantees that the smuggling through the hundreds of tunnels snaking from Egypt into Gaza would stop.

"Halt the arms smuggling from Sinai into Gaza and the Israeli combat will stop," Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said last week.

Several options on how to do that are currently on the table.

The Egyptians are proposing to deploy forces loyal to Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas -- whom Hamas ousted from Gaza in June 2007 -- on the Gaza side of the border and boost Egyptian troops on the other side, several Israeli officials have told AFP.

The Egyptian proposal is an "upgraded version" of the 2005 deal for the Rafah border crossing that required the presence of Palestinian Authority forces and European Union observers, they said.

The Palestinian force would be larger

and have more authority in the crossing and along the entire border," said one defence ministry official.

At the same time, Cairo is proposing that it deploy more forces along its border with Gaza, a move, which would require amending the 1979 Israel-Egypt peace deal which limits the number of Egyptian troops in the Sinai peninsula.

The Egyptian forces would work in cooperation with a foreign engineering corps, which would locate and destroy smuggling tunnels along the border, he said.

Europe, meanwhile, has proposed sending international troops to patrol the border, with Denmark and the Netherlands offering to send forces to the Sinai peninsula, a senior Western diplomat in Israel told AFP.

That plan however is unlikely to get off the ground as "Egypt will never accept foreign forces on its side of the border," according to a European official in Cairo.

Meanwhile Abbas has also called for international troops, but on the Gaza side of the border.

"We want an international presence in the Gaza Strip and not on the Egyptian border," he said in Cairo on Saturday.

Israel is favourable both to the Egyptian and Abbas proposals, officials have told AFP.

Israel "would consider favourably the

deployment of Palestinian Authority forces along the Philadelphia Route," as the 15-kilometre (nine-mile) border between Gaza and Egypt is known, a senior official told AFP.

"Israel wants calm and an end to weapons smuggling into Gaza, if such a solution would answer these requirements, Israel will be satisfied," he said, adding that this included the deployment of foreign troops along the border.

Hamas however adamantly opposes any foreign deployment on the border or in Gaza and on Saturday Hamas political supremo Khaled Meshaal said the Islamists would view any international troops as an "occupation force."

He was joined by the leaders of nine other Syrian-based Palestinian factions, who issued a joint statement rejecting "any international forces or observers in the Gaza Strip or any security arrangements that undermine the resistance" against Israel.

The exiled leaders also said they "reject any initiative or proposal that aims to achieve the goals which the enemy failed to achieve through the barbaric military offensive."

Israel has said it aims to wipe out Hamas's ability to fire rockets from its Gaza stronghold and its ability to smuggle weapons into the territory.



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli tanks roll on towards the Gaza Strip from the Israel-Gaza border yesterday. Israeli troops and armour pushed deeper into Gaza's main city Sunday, sending panicked Palestinian civilians to flee fighting.

Battered Hamas puts faith in street fighters

AFP, Jerusalem

The only way for Hamas to salvage the Gaza war is to lure Israeli troops into street battles in the crowded enclave's myriad backstreets and hope the toll rises, analysts say.

After two weeks of conflict that has left more than 850 Palestinians dead, some analysts are already drawing comparisons with the 2003 US invasion of Iraq in which crushing military superiority was transformed into a grinding battle with insurgents.

"The overriding sense within Hamas is that time is on their side," said Nicolas Pelham, senior Middle East analyst for the International Crisis Group think tank.

Hundreds of Israeli air raids and a ground invasion of the Palestinian territory have battered Hamas but failed to stop the cross-border rocket attacks that Israel said forced it into Operation Cast Lead.

Pressure on the Middle East's most powerful army has been increased by a UN Security Council resolution demanding a ceasefire and troop withdrawal, stinging criticism by UN agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross and the looming arrival of Barack Obama as US president.

It is a war that both sides have carefully prepared.

Hamas built up its Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades military wing and, according to Israel, built sniper nests, booby-trap bombs and escape tunnels across the territory.

Obama vows ME peace effort from 'day one'

AFP, Washington

US president-elect Barack Obama said in an interview broadcast yesterday he will create a special team that will engage in Middle East peace efforts immediately after he takes office on January 20.

"What I am doing right now is putting together the team so that on January 20th, starting on day one, we have the best possible people who are going to be immediately engaged in the Middle East peace process as a whole," he said in an interview with ABC News.

The team would "be engaging with all of the actors there. That will work to create a strategic approach that ensures that both Israelis and Palestinians can meet their aspirations," Obama said.

Until then, he said again that he would leave the administration of President George W. Bush to speak on foreign policy but indicated some continuity to the peace process.

"I think that if you look not just at the Bush

administration, but also what happened under the (Bill) Clinton administration, you are seeing the general outlines of an approach," Obama said in the interview taped Saturday.

Obama noted advice he received from Vice President Dick Cheney last week that his team should carefully study the outgoing administration's approach before throwing it away just to make a political point.

"I think that was pretty good advice," the president-elect said. "I should know what's going on before we make judgments and that we shouldn't be making judgments on the basis of incomplete information or campaign rhetoric."

Under the Bush administration, the United States has been accused by the Palestinians of siding uncritically with Israel to the detriment of the peace process overall.

Obama stood by his words of July, during a visit to Israel, when he had said: "If somebody was sending rockets into my house where my two daughters sleep at night, I'm going to do everything in my power to stop that. I would expect Israelis to do the same thing."



PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian woman wounded during Israeli strikes is carried to Shifa hospital in Gaza City yesterday. Israeli troops and Hamas fighters battled on Sunday in some of their heaviest clashes yet as Israel said it is nearing the goals of its war.

Biden, Afghan president discuss 'war on terror'

AFP, Kabul

US vice president-elect Joe Biden and President Hamid Karzai met for several hours Saturday, discussing all aspects of US help for Afghanistan's efforts to fight extremists and rebuild, an official said.

Biden was in Kabul on a short visit 10 days before he was due to take office alongside president-elect Barack Obama, who has said Afghanistan will be a priority for his administration.

The senator's meeting with Karzai was "fruitful and productive" and included commitments to continued cooperation in the war against terrorism, the Afghan president's spokesman Homayun Hamidzadeh told AFP.

The United States led the invasion that removed the Taliban regime from power in 2001 and provides the bulk of the international troops fighting an insurgency by the extremists, and is also pouring in development aid.

The talks also touched on Afghanistan's efforts to build government and establish rule of law, fight its illegal drugs trade, and build its institutions especially in the security sector, Hamidzadeh said.

Biden met a host of other officials in Kabul on the multi-billion-dollar international mili-

tary and development effort in Afghanistan, which has been criticised as disjointed and wasteful.

US General David McKiernan, the most senior commander in the country and head of the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force, gave him an operational and intelligence briefing, Isaf said in a statement.

Biden also thanked US troops serving here for their "big sacrifice", it said.

Nearly half of the almost 70,000 international soldiers in Afghanistan are from the US military, which leads efforts to hunt down "terrorists" and build the country's own security forces.

A meeting with UN special representative Kai Eide "touched on security, political, and development issues including donor coordination, police reform, and regional cooperation," the UN office here said, referring to priority areas.

Interior Minister Mohammad Hanif Atmar separately requested more for the building of the national police force, said a statement from the ministry.

It cited Biden as saying: "Security in Afghanistan is in the struggle against terrorism is our priority and the police have a key role in this."

Prince Harry apologises for racist language

AFP, London

Britain's Prince Harry has apologised for using racist language after a Sunday newspaper reported he had filmed himself calling an army colleague a "Paki" and telling another he looked like a "raghead".

The video obtained by the News of the World plunges the 24-year-old prince, the third in line to the throne, into fresh controversy four years after he sparked outcry by wearing a Nazi swastika at a fancy dress party.

The newspaper posted the video on its website and said it was made in 2006 when the prince was still an officer cadet.

It begins as he is waiting with his platoon in an airport departure lounge for a flight to a training exercise in Cyprus.

Touring the room with a video camera as his colleagues snooze, he spots an Asian cadet and says: "Anybody else around here?... Ah, our little Paki friend, Ahmed."

Protests in major cities against Gaza carnage

AFP, Madrid

Cities around the world staged fresh protests yesterday both in support of and opposed to Israel's attacks on the Gaza Strip as the bombing campaign entered its third week.

Thousands of students, trade unionists and politicians marched through the centre of Madrid to denounce the Israeli action in Gaza and call for peace.

Protesters marched between the Plaza de Cibeles and Puerta del Sol, brandishing placards that read "Stop the genocide in Palestine" and "We are all Palestinians."

Some members of the crowd wore Palestinian flags to show their solidarity with the people of Gaza, where almost 900 people have been killed since the Israeli offensive began 16 days ago.

In Brussels, Muslim associations, centre-left politicians and pressure groups began

their own rally to call for a halt to the conflict. Organisers said they estimated between 10,000 and 15,000 people would attend.

Around 4,000 people marched through the western Austrian town of Bregenz, despite the extremely cold weather, organisers said. The demonstrators, including families with children, waved Turkish, Palestinian and Arab flags, played music and carried signs with slogans like "Let Gaza live". Some wore T-shirts that said "We are all Palestinians".

Jewish groups across Europe also held rallies in support of Israel and denouncing Hamas. Thousands of British Jews rallied in central London to call for peace for the citizens of both Israel and Gaza.

Waving Israeli and British flags and carrying placards reading "End Hamas terror! Peace for the people of Israel and Gaza", demonstrators

prayed for peace as speakers demanded Hamas stop firing rockets at Israeli civilians.

Henry Grunwald, president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Israeli ambassador Ron Prosor, Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and lawmakers addressed the demonstrators, who chanted: "Yes to peace".

Police estimated the crowd at the demonstration in Trafalgar Square at 4,000, but organisers claimed the turnout was closer to 20,000.

Counter-demonstrators lining the side of the square chanted throughout the rally, waving placards reading "We are all Hamas. Boycott Israel", "Israeli terrorist cowards" and "End the siege -- talk to Hamas".

The hour-long rally ended with the singing of the British and Israeli national anthems. Similar pro-Israeli demonstrations were also held in the German cities of Berlin,

Frankfurt and Munich, with authorities saying altogether 2,000 people took part.

Charlotte Knobloch, the president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, told crowds in Munich that "the sole responsibility of the death of civilians on both sides lay with Hamas."

Police in Marseille, southern France, said around 4,000 people marched through the city in support of Israel's right to self defence.

Outside of Europe, pro-Palestinian rallies were also held across Asia earlier Sunday.

In Hong Kong, more than 1,000 students and ethnic minorities took part in a protest organised on social networking website Facebook.

The group, holding placards and banners, marched from Victoria Park to the US consulate general demanding the United States stop supporting Israel's offensive on Gaza.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Gaza onslaught boosts Islamists' popularity

AFP, Dubai

Israel's assault on the Gaza Strip is boosting the popularity of Hamas and other Islamic groups in the Arab world where people are dismayed by the passiveness of their regimes, analysts say yesterday.

"Hamas appears to be scoring points. So far, Israel has not achieved all its military and political objectives and has lost the media battle," said Doha Rashwan, an Egyptian specialist in Islamist movements.

Israel's military offensive on the Hamas-controlled territory has killed at least 875 Palestinians, including 275 children, and left 3,620 wounded, since it began on December 27.

Media coverage shows an imbalance between a modern force, armed to the teeth with the most sophisticated weapons, and a militia equipped only for guerrilla warfare, analysts said.

This appears to have contributed to inciting angry

protests worldwide, mainly in Arab countries, they believe.

"This is a repetition of the major crises seen in the region during the past few years," which strengthened Islamism in the Arab world, Rashwan told AFP.

He highlighted Israel's war on Lebanon in July 2006 which failed to destroy the military might of the Iran-backed Shia Hezbollah, and the US-led 2003 invasion of Iraq, which brought Islamism to the forefront of the resistance.

"Opposition in the Arab world has become led by Islamist movements... Public opinion is led by these movements," at the expense of Arab nationalists and liberal oppositions who are losing ground.

Meanwhile, "the gap between Arab regimes and their people is being widened all the time," Rashwan added.

Abdul Aziz al-Sager, head of the Dubai-based Gulf Research Centre (GRC), agreed that Islamists are reaping a windfall of popularity from the Gaza war.

"Injustice serves the Islamist movements, putting them in the vanguard through their support for jihad" or holy war, in the Arab world, he told AFP.

"What Israel is doing in Gaza is strengthening Hamas" in terms of gaining the backing of the public opinion for the movement, although "part of this opinion still notices a lack of political maturity of this movement," Sager said.

"In wanting to wipe out the resistance, you have created a resistance inside every household," Hamas's exiled political chief, Khaled Meshaal, told Israeli leaders in a speech on Saturday.

"As Israel strikes Hamas to weaken it, this movement is becoming stronger among the Palestinians and Arabs, mainly as it has proven to be the only one to stand up to Israel, following the example of Hezbollah in Lebanon," Bahraini activist Ali Fakhrou told AFP.

"Through this war, Israel does not seek (just) to hit Hamas, but the Islamist resis-

tance which is feared by the United States and its allies among the Arab regimes, who believe that success for this resistance would lead to fundamental changes," in the region, he said.

"Islamist movements, born out of the void created by the collapse of the Arab nationalist and leftist ideologies, are the only ones capable of protecting the region from the madness of the Israeli politics and Israel," said the former Arab nationalist.

"Islamist movements are going to dominate the political scene for many years to come," Fakhrou predicted, citing the "interaction between these movements and the Arab street where recent pro-Gaza demonstrations were dominated by Islamist slogans and calls for jihad."

Jordan's Princess Haya, a UN messenger of peace, also warned that growing Arab anger and frustration over Israel's war in the Gaza Strip, could spiral out of control.



PHOTO: AFP

Anti-Israeli protesters march on the street during a demonstration in front of the Federal Building in Los Angeles, California, on Saturday. Thousands of protesters took to the streets in US and European cities on Saturday as Israel vowed to escalate its war in Gaza that has left nearly 900 Palestinians dead so far.