

Gaza development put back 60 years by war: UN

AFP, Davos

The Israel-Hamas war has put back development in Gaza by 60 years and mobilising the tens of billions of dollars needed for reconstruction will be an uphill task, the United Nations said.

Around two-thirds of all buildings in the Gaza Strip have been destroyed or damaged, and removing the estimated 42 million tonnes of rubble will be dangerous and complex, the head of the UN Development Programme told AFP.

"Probably between 65 percent to 70 percent of buildings in Gaza have either been entirely destroyed or damaged," Achim Steiner said in an interview at the World Economic Forum annual meeting in the Swiss ski resort town of Davos.

"But we're also talking about an economy that has been destroyed, where we estimate that roughly 60 years of development have been lost in this conflict over 15 months."

"Two million people who are in the Gaza Strip have lost not only their shelter: they've lost public infrastructure, sewage treatment systems, freshwater supply systems, public waste management. All of these fundamental infrastructure and



service elements simply do not exist."

And for all these towering numbers, Steiner stressed: "Human desperation is not just something that you capture in statistics."

The fragile ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza war took effect on Sunday.

Steiner said it was difficult to put a timeframe on reconstruction due to the "volatile" nature of the ceasefire, and because the UN's immediate focus is on life-saving aid.

"When we talk about reconstruction, we are not talking about one or two years here," he said.

"We are talking about years and years, until you even come close to rebuilding, first of all, the physical infrastructure, but it's also an entire economy."

"People had savings. People had loans. People had invested in businesses. And all of this is lost. So we are talking about the physical and economic, and in some ways even the psychosocial phase for reconstruction."

He said the physical reconstruction alone would cost "tens of billions of dollars", and "we do face an enormous uphill struggle on how to mobilise that scale of finance".

SECOND HOSTAGE-PRISONER SWAP

Four Israeli soldiers, 200 Palestinians freed

AGENCIES

Palestinian militants and Israel carried out a hostage-prisoner swap yesterday under a Gaza ceasefire deal, but a last-minute dispute blocked the expected return of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to devastated northern Gaza.

As part of the exchange, the second since the truce took effect last Sunday, four freed Israeli women hostages, all soldiers, arrived home in Israel after more than 15 months of captivity in Gaza.

In exchange, Israel's prison service confirmed that 200 prisoners, whom it called "terrorists", were freed.

The Israeli captives, Karina Ariev, Daniella Gilboa and Naama Levy, all aged 20, and Liri Albag, 19, waved, smiled, and gave thumbs up as they were paraded on a stage in Gaza City.

Masked and armed militants flanked them during a slick ceremony watched by hundreds of residents.

In Tel Aviv, where a crowd gathered to watch their release on a large TV screen at a plaza known as Hostage Square, there were tears of joy, applause and a loud cheer as Israeli flags waved.

After their handover to the Red Cross, Israel's military said the women were transferred back into Israel and "reunited with their parents".

They were later taken by military helicopter to the Rabin Medical Centre, where they would receive "comprehensive medical care, including psychological support", according to Israel's health ministry.

Buses carrying the released Palestinians left Ofer prison in the occupied West Bank and Ktziot prison in the Negev desert.

As dozens of the former prisoners reached the West Bank city of Ramallah, crowds of Palestinians erupted in joy, raising many of



them onto their shoulders, an AFP journalist said.

The Palestinian Prisoners Club advocacy group said among those to be released was Mohammed Al Tous, 69, who has spent the longest continuous period in Israeli detention.

Bassem Naim, of the Hamas political bureau, had told AFP on Friday that Palestinians displaced by the war to southern Gaza should have been able to begin returning to the north following Saturday's releases.

But Israel yesterday said it would block such returns until civilian woman hostage Arbel Yehud is released.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said she "was supposed to be released today" but a Hamas source told AFP Yehud will be "released as part of the third swap set for next Saturday".

On social media platform X, the military's Arabic-language spokesman, Avichay Adraee, reiterated that Gazans were not allowed to

approach the Netzarim corridor through which they have to pass to reach their homes in the north.

The truce has brought a surge of food, fuel, medical and other aid into rubble-strewn Gaza, but Israel's UN ambassador on Friday confirmed that the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees, Gaza's main aid agency, must end all operations in Israel by Thursday.

The hostage-prisoner exchange is part of a fragile ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas that took effect last Sunday, and which is intended to pave the way to a permanent end to the war.

Mediators Qatar and the United States announced the agreement days ahead of US President Donald Trump's inauguration. Trump has since claimed credit for securing the deal after months of fruitless negotiations.

The ceasefire agreement should be implemented in three phases, but the last two stages have not yet been finalised.



This image released by the Department of Defense shows undocumented migrants awaiting takeoff for a removal flight at the Tucson International Airport, Arizona. The flight came as the White House said it had arrested more than a thousand people in two days with hundreds deported by military aircraft, saying that "the largest massive deportation operation in history is well underway." The photo was taken on Thursday. PHOTO: AFP



Hamas fighters escort four Israeli hostages, (centre: L-R) Naama Levy, Liri Albag, Daniella Gilboa and Karina Ariev, on a stage before handing them over to a team from the Red Cross in Gaza City yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Drone attack on hospital kills 30 in Darfur

AFP, Port Sudan

A drone attack on one of the last functioning hospitals in El-Fasher in Sudan's Darfur region killed 30 people and injured dozens, a medical source said yesterday.

The bombing of the Saudi Hospital on Friday evening "led to the destruction" of the hospital's emergency building, the source told AFP, requesting anonymity for fear of retaliation.

It was not immediately clear which of Sudan's warring sides had launched the attack.

Since April 2023, the Sudanese army has been at war with the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), who have seized nearly the entire vast western region of Darfur.

They have besieged El-Fasher, the state capital of North Darfur, since May, but have not managed to claim the city.

Last week, they issued an ultimatum demanding army forces and allies leave the city by Wednesday afternoon in advance of an expected offensive.

Local activists have reported intermittent fighting since, including repeated artillery fire from the RSF on the famine-hit Abu Shouk displacement camp.

'Peace talks minus Ukraine will yield no real results'

AFP, Kyiv

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky yesterday said allies should work towards determining a format for any upcoming peace talks with Russia and that Kyiv must be involved for successful negotiations.

His comments are the latest to pile speculation over the possibility of talks to end the brutal conflict that has cost tens of thousands of lives after almost three years of fighting.

"I understand that contacts can be in different formats," Zelensky said, referring to possible negotiations that would lead to "a just peace".

President Vladimir Putin earlier this week said he was ready for talks with US counterpart Donald Trump on Ukraine, praising him as a "smart" leader

who might have prevented the conflict from starting in February 2022.

Putin did not say when talks could take place. Trump, who was inaugurated on Monday, has called the conflict "ridiculous" and threatened Russia with tougher economic sanctions if it does not agree to stop its offensive.

Zelensky said in Kyiv that talks to end the war should be held between the United States, Ukraine and Russia, as well as the European Union.

"It is impossible to exclude Ukraine from any negotiation platform, or this negotiation platform will not have real results, but will have political results," he said.

"And such results will have nothing to do with security and the end of the war," he said.

Zelensky has put forward several proposals to end the conflict, including his so-called victory plan at a Ukraine summit last year that brought together dozens of countries and organisations.

Former Fox News co-host to lead Pentagon

AFP, Washington

The US Senate narrowly confirmed former Fox News co-host Pete Hegseth as Pentagon chief on Friday, despite allegations of alcohol abuse, sexual misconduct and other fears about his ability to lead the world's most powerful military.

Three Republican senators voted against Donald Trump's pick as secretary of defense, resulting in a 50-50 tie that required J.D. Vance to cast the deciding ballot -- only the second time in history a vice president has had to intervene to save a cabinet nominee.

The razor-edged result underscored concerns about Hegseth, who will take over the Pentagon with war raging in Ukraine, the Middle East volatile despite ceasefires in Lebanon and Gaza, and as Trump expands the military's role in security on the US-Mexico border.

The 44-year-old is a former Army National Guard officer who until recently worked as a co-host for Fox News -- one of Trump's favored television channels.

Hegseth has a combative media personality, fierce loyalty and telegenic looks -- common hallmarks in Trump's entourage.

Supporters say Hegseth's deployments

in Afghanistan and Iraq give him the insight to run the Defense Department better than more experienced officials who would normally be considered for the job.

He has pledged to focus the military on "lethality" and to bring back "warrior culture" to the Pentagon.

In confirming him, Republicans brushed aside his lack of experience leading an organisation anywhere near the size of the Defense Department -- the country's largest employer with some three million personnel.

They also approved Hegseth despite allegations of financial mismanagement at veterans' nonprofits where he previously worked, reports of excessive drinking, and allegations that he sexually assaulted a woman in California.

Asked during his confirmation hearing last week about criticism he has faced, Hegseth said there was a "coordinated smear campaign" against him, and that he is "not a perfect person, but redemption is real."

Trump has stood by him, telling reporters Friday: "Pete's a very, very good man."

But three Republicans -- senators Susan Collins, Mitch McConnell and Lisa Murkowski -- were unconvinced and voted against him.

