

Shaky truce holds in the Gaza Strip

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As the 72-hour ceasefire in the Gaza Strip that began on Tuesday morning holds, talks are underway in Cairo between Israeli and Palestinian delegations, mediated by Egyptian officials, over an end to the month-long Israeli military onslaught.

The truce remains fragile. The Israeli military has pulled its ground troops back to positions on the border but is poised to recommence its bombardment on the slightest pretext. The tiny, densely populated enclave of 1.8 million people remains under an Israeli-Egyptian economic blockade and menaced on all sides by Israeli forces, from land, air and sea.

No agreement has been reached to extend the ceasefire beyond the deadline of Friday morning local time. Israeli officials indicated to the media that Israel would agree to an extension, but only without conditions. Hamas, the ruling party in Gaza, has yet to acquiesce to such an arrangement.

Having reportedly achieved its immediate military goals of destroying cross-border tunnels and curtailing the military capacities of Palestinian militants, Israel has all the cards stacked in its favour. The Gaza Strip remains under siege and Israel is assured of the support of Washington and the Western media should it choose to restart its murderous offensive.

Moreover, the negotiations in Cairo are taking place under the auspices of the Egyptian military junta, which is hostile to Hamas. Israel can count on Egypt and the US, represented by American special envoy Frank Lowenstein, to put pressure on the Palestinian delegation, particularly the representatives of Hamas, to make concessions.

Israel, Egypt and the US are all pushing for the Palestinian Authority headed by Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas to play a role in policing the Gaza Strip, as it has done in the West Bank. Hamas won the 2006 national elections precisely because of widespread hostility to the corruption of the Fatah leadership and its

subservience to Israel. A shaky reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas to form a unity government was only reached in April.

Hamas has rejected Israel's demand for the "demilitarisation" of Gaza—that is, the disarmament of Hamas fighters and those of other Palestinian factions—and is calling for an end to the economic blockade, an international reconstruction fund and the release of Palestinian prisoners by Israel.

Israel, with the backing of Egypt and the US, is seeking to exploit the misery and suffering in Gaza caused by its military offensive to force Hamas to accept its rival Fatah performing a policing role. Any easing of the economic blockade would be conditional on Hamas handing over control of Gaza border crossings to the Palestinian Authority.

Yossi Kuperwasser, a senior official in Israel's Strategic Affairs Ministry, called for tougher measures. Fatah could have a role, he declared, "but we can't say we can fully trust just Abu Mazen [Abbas]. It's got to be something more robust. International and Egyptian elements should be involved in it."

Sections of the Israeli cabinet opposed any ceasefire and were demanding the military conquest of the Gaza Strip and destruction of Hamas. According to a *Haaretz* report yesterday, extreme right-wing Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Strategic and Intelligence Affairs Minister Yuval Steinitz only backed down after a meeting with military officials, who warned that heavy Israeli casualties and high costs would be involved.

While shelving plans for a full military occupation, for the time being at least, the Israeli government will maintain its economic blockade and the constant threat of renewed military action in an attempt to break Palestinian resistance and bludgeon Hamas into accepting its demands.

The US-backed Egyptian junta, which seized power

in a coup last year, has made clear that it will continue to blockade the Gaza Strip. The Egyptian intelligence agency issued a statement yesterday declaring that Egypt would not agree to major changes at the Rafah crossing as long as Hamas controlled the Gaza side.

The blockade will not only continue the hardships suffered by Palestinians. It will also prevent any reconstruction of the many buildings destroyed or damaged by Israeli military bombardments. Israel, with Egypt's support, has prevented the movement of basic construction materials, such as cement, into the Gaza Strip, claiming that they would be used to build cross border tunnels.

The latest reports by Palestinian authorities and UN organisations give an indication of the extent of the death and destruction wrought on Gaza's population by the Israeli military.

According to the Palestine health ministry, 1,875 Palestinians were killed over the past month, including 430 children. Another 9,567 people were injured, including 2,878 children. UN agencies estimated that more than 80 percent of the Palestinian casualties were civilians.

The Palestinian Authority said the conflict caused damage worth up to \$US6 billion. Around 10,000 homes were destroyed.

The UN's deputy humanitarian chief, Kyung-wha Kang, appealed for \$367 million to meet the immediate needs of more than 500,000 people who "fled for their lives with nothing." She said 65,000 people lost everything as a result of the destruction of their homes.

Kang described the "utter devastation" in Gaza: 144 schools and other facilities were damaged, as well as hospitals and primary health care centres. The Israeli military attacked the only power station in the Gaza Strip, leaving the population dependent on limited supplies from Israel and Egypt. The lack of electricity has affected hospitals, sewage pumping stations, food production and other essential services.

The tragedy facing the Palestinian population was underscored by a BBC interview with the Za'Noun family in Beit Hanoun, one of the worst affected areas, on the border with Israel. Their home was destroyed for a third time, forcing them to rebuild again.

"Where else can we go?" Khalil Za'Noun exclaimed. He pointed out that one of his grandchildren, Mohammed, who was just 14, had already lived

through four wars during his short life.



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