

'We have been fasting for five months'

Gazans fasting in Ramadan under starvation

International Desk

Palestinians began fasting for Ramadan on Monday as the Muslim holy month arrived with cease-fire talks at a standstill, hunger worsening across the Gaza Strip and no end in sight to the Israel's brutal strikes on the besieged territory. Prayers were held outside amid the rubble of demolished buildings late Sunday. Some people hung fairy lights and decorations in packed tent camps, and a video from a UN-school-turned-shelter showed children dancing and spraying foam as a man sang into a loudspeaker. But there was little to celebrate after five months of war that has killed over 31,000 Palestinians and left much of Gaza in ruins. Families would ordinarily break the daily fast with holiday feasts, but

even where food is available, there is little beyond canned goods and the prices are too high for many. "You don't see anyone with joy in their eyes," said Sabah al-Hendi, who was shopping for food in the southernmost city of Rafah. "Every family is sad. Every family has a martyr." In the ruins of Gaza, many living under plastic tents and facing a severe shortage of food. "We made no preparations to welcome Ramadan because we have been fasting for five months now," said Maha, a mother of five, who would normally have filled her home with decorations and stocked her refrigerator with supplies for the evening Iftar celebrations when people break their fast. Israel has blocked the entry of food and aid supplies into Gaza draining its limited health services.

Extreme hunger

The head of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) said Ramadan comes in Gaza at a time when "extreme hunger spreads, displacement continues, and fear and anxiety prevail."

"This month should bring a cease-fire for those who have suffered the most," Philippe Lazzarini wrote in an X post.

The United States, Qatar and Egypt had hoped to broker a cease-fire ahead of the normally joyous month of dawn-to-dusk fasting that would include the release of dozens of Israeli captives and Palestinian prisoners, and the entry of a large amount of humanitarian aid, but the talks stalled last week. Hamas is demanding guarantees that any such agreement will lead to an end to the war, while Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin



Palestinians mourn the death of a family member in the courtyard of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir Al-Balah in the central Gaza Strip, after he was killed in Israeli strikes on the makeshift Al-Mawasi camp for displaced people west of Khan Yunis on March 10, 2024.

AFP

Netanyahu has vowed to continue the offensive until "total victory" against the resistance group and the release of all the remaining captives.

The war has driven around 80% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million people from their homes and pushed hundreds of thousands to the brink of famine. Health officials say at least 25 people, mostly children, have died from malnutrition and dehydration in north-

ern Gaza.

Israeli forces have largely sealed off the north since October, and aid groups say Israeli restrictions, ongoing hostilities and the breakdown of law and order have made it nearly impossible to safely deliver desperately needed food in much of the territory.

Israel has meanwhile vowed to expand its offensive to the southern city of Rafah, where half of Gaza's population has sought refuge, without saying where civilians would go to escape the onslaught. US President Joe Biden has said an attack on Rafah would be

a "red line" for him, but that the United States would continue to provide military aid to Israel. The United States and other countries have begun airdropping aid in recent days, but humanitarian groups say such efforts are costly and insufficient.

This is while, the US has been providing crucial military support to Israel since the beginning of the war and shielded it from international calls for a cease-fire.

Gaza's Health Ministry said Monday that at least 31,112 Palestinians have been killed since the war began.

Iran, Russia, China to hold naval drills in Gulf of Oman



IRNA

International Desk

Naval forces from Iran, Russia and China will begin military drills in the Gulf of Oman on Tuesday. Russia's Defense Ministry said a group of its warships had arrived in Iran to take part in drills with Iran and China in the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea.

The joint exercises, called "Maritime Security Belt - 2024," will involve warships and aviation, the Russian Defense Ministry said in a statement quoted by state media on Monday. "The main purpose of the maneuvers is to work out the safety of maritime economic activity."

Russia's grouping is led by the Varyag, a missile cruiser from its Pacific Fleet, the ministry said. It said representatives from the navies of Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Oman, India and South Africa would act as observers.

The naval and airborne units of Iran's Navy will participate in the joint naval drills. Naval delegations from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Oman, Pakistan and South Africa have taken part as observers in the exercises.

The Maritime Security Belt - 2024 naval drills are meant to beef up security and its fundamentals in the region, enhance multilateral cooperation among the participating countries, and to demonstrate the goodwill and ability of the participants to jointly safeguard global peace and maritime security.

The exercises are also intended to strengthen the security of international maritime trade, combat piracy and maritime terrorism, and provide an opportunity for the exchange of information in the field of maritime rescue as well as operational and tactical experiences.

The Iranian naval forces and their Chinese and Russian counterparts have held several military drills in recent years to enhance the security and stability of international maritime trade.

They have also been involved in joint efforts aimed at countering piracy and maritime terrorism, exchanging information in naval rescue and relief operations as well as sharing operational and tactical experience.

In March 2023, the Iranian, Chinese and Russian naval forces staged the 2023 Marine Security Belt war game in the northern parts of the Indian Ocean, which was the fourth joint exercise in recent years.

Kazakhstan-Azerbaijan relations: growing prospects for cooperation

Against the background of regional tensions and economic instability, the relevance of integration within the framework of various international organizations and cross-border routes is growing. In addition, the development of socio-economic and cultural-humanitarian relations underpins successful interaction within the framework of bilateral cooperation between the countries of the region. In this context, today the littoral states of the Caspian Sea determine the trajectory of regional cooperation and security aimed at ensuring the maintenance of a sustainable dialog between the states.

Historically, the strategic interaction between the countries of the region is based on close humanitarian ties. Thus, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan are united by centuries-old friendship, common history, language, culture and religion.

Experts note that the upcoming state visit of President of Kazakhstan K. Tokayev to Azerbaijan will be another leap towards more fruitful relations between the two countries. Economic relations between the two countries have been developing rapidly in recent years. Kazakhstan is also one of the most important partners of Azerbaijan in CAR, where more than 900 companies with Azerbaijani capital are registered, operating in the sphere of trade and intermediary activities, road and capital construction, processing and logistics. In turn, about 150 Kazakh companies operate in Azerbaijan, covering the spheres of industry, agriculture, trade, services, construction and transportation.

Huge natural resources, maritime borders, and geostrategic location on the historic Silk Road are the main drivers of bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. Trade, industry, energy, transportation and agriculture are the priority areas of mutual cooperation.

Today, there is a sufficiently developed legal framework between Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. In the field of economic relations, about 40 important bilateral documents have been signed over the past year and a half, which have a positive impact on the development of mutual trade.

Along with this, international logistics projects are an effective tool for entering new markets, which is especially important during crisis periods in the global economy. Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan have unique opportunities to intensify bilateral trade and improve trade turnover, including through

international transport corridors. At the same time, in the context of declining world energy prices, it is important to increase trade in non-raw materials. Given these favorable conditions, the role of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) in the relations between the two countries is significantly increasing.

At the same time, the development and functioning of transportation corridors is one of the priority areas of Iran's foreign policy. Thus, the increasing role and participation in trade and transit routes can help Iran reduce the impact of Western economic sanctions and allow the country to trade more freely with the world's leading countries, including the Central Asian states. Astana is considering TITR in the transportation of oil, uranium, wheat, and the construction of a fiber-optic communication line along the Caspian Sea bed. In turn, expanding the capacity of the TITR and laying fiber-optic cables is crucial for Baku to ensure long-term economic prosperity and political influence in the region, as well as active interaction with Kazakhstan.

Economic observers note that taking into account the direct participation of the Azerbaijani side in the functioning of TITR, the organization of work on the universalization of electronic cargo clearance and synchronization of digital solutions with countries in the directions of major transit corridors will expand the capabilities of this route, track cargo flows along the route and reduce delays at the borders.

Relations between the two countries are also developing within the framework of international organizations. Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan are members of a number of universal and regional organizations, including the UN, CIS, OSCE, ECO and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), which underscores the growing cooperation between the Caspian littoral states and the potential for regional integration.

At present, given the emerging global trends, as well as the growing importance of cross-border routes, there is a need for the countries of the region to increase bilateral relations and mutual integration. In this regard, according to journalistic circles, the visit of the President of Kazakhstan K. Tokayev to Azerbaijan confirms the commitment of the parties to expanding bilateral relations and will give fresh impetus to new joint projects in various areas of economic cooperation.

Iran calls US airdrop of aid into Gaza 'ridiculous, symbolic' move



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International Desk

Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani slammed the US airdrop of humanitarian aid into Gaza as "a merely symbolic" move.

Kanaani said Washington vetoed three resolutions calling for an immediate end to the war in the besieged strip and, at the same time, is sending its weapons to Israel.

He emphasized that the US resorts to "ridiculous and bitter" measures in an effort to rectify and justify its warmongering policy.

However, the people of the world are aware of the realities on the ground, he said.

The US Central Command has announced that together with Jordan's Air Force it had "conducted a combined humanitarian assistance airdrop into Gaza ... to provide essential relief to civilians affected by the ongoing conflict."

Kanaani also said that the US is the main party responsible for the start and continuation of Israel's war on the people of Palestine in the Gaza Strip.

"The American government stood by the Zionist regime in words and deeds," Kanaani said. Since the beginning of Israel's war in October, the US has been providing the regime with large-scale shipments of weapons, he added.

He noted that the US has been exerting pressure on the Palestinian people, slamming the "painful inaction" of the international community, particularly the United Nations, over the past five months about the Israeli regime's brutal attacks against Gaza.