

Serenity descends on Gaza

Hamas: Cease-fire 'result of legendary steadfastness' of Palestinians

Gen. Qa'ani calls truce agreement biggest defeat for Israel

International Desk

A cease-fire between Israel and Hamas took hold in the Gaza Strip on Sunday, ushering in an initial six-week period of calm and raising hopes for an end to the Israel's devastating 15-month war on Gaza and the release of dozens of Israeli hostages.

The truce finally took effect after a three-hour delay, during which Israeli forces pounded Gaza from the air in a final blitz that killed 13 people, according to Palestinian health authorities. Even before the cease-fire came into force, celebrations erupted across the territory and thousands of Gazans carrying tents, clothes and their personal belongings were seen heading back to their homes, after more than 15 months of war that displaced the vast majority of Gaza's population, in many cases more than once.

Israel, meanwhile, announced the release of the three hostages later Sunday, in exchange for the planned release of 90 Palestinian prisoners.

The truce, which started at 11:15 a.m. local time, is the first step toward ultimately ending the conflict and returning nearly 100 captives held by Hamas since Oct. 7, 2023.

Israel's hardline national securi-

ty minister, meanwhile, said his Jewish Power faction was quitting the cabinet in protest at the cease-fire agreement. Itamar Ben-Gvir's departure weakens Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition but will not affect the truce.

The cease-fire deal was announced last week after a year of mediation by the United States, Qatar and Egypt. The outgoing Biden administration and President-elect Donald Trump's team had both pressed for an agreement to be reached before the inauguration on Monday.

Netanyahu on Saturday warned that he had Trump's backing to continue fighting if necessary.

The 42-day first phase of the cease-fire should see 33 captives returned from Gaza and hundreds of Palestinian prisoners and detainees released. Many displaced Palestinians should be able to return home. Under the deal, Israeli forces will also withdraw from densely populated areas of Gaza and allow displaced Palestinians to return "to their residences," Qatari said.

Humanitarian aid

There is also supposed to be a surge of humanitarian aid, with hundreds of trucks entering Gaza daily, far more than Israel had earlier allowed. The United

Nations' World Food Program said trucks started entering through two crossings after the ceasefire took hold.

This is just the second cease-fire in the war, longer and more consequential than a weeklong pause in November 2023, with the potential to end the fighting for good.

Negotiations on the far more difficult second phase of this cease-fire should begin in just over two weeks. Major questions remain, including whether the war will resume after the first phase and how the rest of the captives in Gaza will be freed.

Hamas fighters appeared at some celebrations in Gaza where crowds chanted slogans in support of them.

Gazans return home

In the southern city of Rafah, residents returned amid massive destruction. Some found human remains including skulls in the rubble.

The toll of the war has been immense, and new details on its scope will now emerge.

Over 46,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's strikes, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which says women and children make up more than half the fatalities.

The war erupted after Hamas launched an operation on Isra-



Displaced Palestinians return to the war-devastated Jabalia refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip on January 19, 2025.
OMAR AL-QATTAA/AFP

el's positions in the occupied territories and killed over 1,200 people and held captive around 250 others. More than 100 hostages were freed during the weeklong cease-fire in November.

Some 90% of Gaza's population has been displaced. The United Nations says homes, the health system, road networks and other vital infrastructure have been badly damaged.

Thousands of displaced, war-weary Gazans set off across the devastated Palestinian territory to return to their home areas on Sunday.

Hamas said the cease-fire was the "result of the legendary steadfastness of our great Palestinian people and our valiant resistance in the Gaza Strip for over 15 months."

'Biggest defeat' for Israel

The commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps lauded the cease-fire agreement as the biggest defeat for the regime.

Brigadier General Esmail Qa'ani said on Sunday that the cease-fire was the "biggest defeat" the Tel Aviv regime had experienced in its "miserable life" as it failed

to achieve any of its goals. "The bloodthirsty, child-killing butchers of the Zionist regime, after 15 months of unrestrained crimes they committed against the oppressed people of Palestine, Lebanon and the region, were forced to accept a cease-fire today at the pinnacle of humiliation; this cease-fire was imposed on the Zionist regime," Qa'ani said.

The Quds Force chief underlined that the cease-fire deal was the same as what had been proposed in the previous round of negotiations, but Israel had rejected it.

Military chief to discuss border issues, defense ties during Pakistan visit

International Desk

Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Baqeri, who arrived in Pakistan's capital on Sunday, said the most important topics of his two-day visit would revolve on the border and the expansion of relations between the two countries' armed forces.

General Baqeri said Iran and Pakistan share a long border and both countries are trying to resolve security issues at the border and expand economic ties. Referring to the growing military and security relations between the two countries, he emphasized that Tehran and Islamabad have a common position on most issues and that this coordination will be strengthened in the regional and international forums.

He said that Iran and Pakistan are locat-



ed in the sensitive regions of West and South Asia that have seen major events over the past year.

"Fortunately, relations between the armed forces of the two countries have been developing in recent years and we have reached good agreements," he said. Baqeri is scheduled to hold talks with high-ranking Pakistani military and political officials.

This is Baqeri's third visit to Pakistan since he was appointed in June 2016.

President favors direct talks with US: Iranian MP

International Desk

An Iranian lawmaker said President Massoud Pezeshkian favors direct negotiations with the United States to put an end to long-standing differences, including Iran's nuclear issue. Ahmad Bakhshayesh, a member of Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, said on Sunday that Oman has traditionally mediated between the two nations, but direct talks would be more effective.

Bakhshayesh stressed that Pezeshkian coordinates with Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei on various matters, including negotiations with the West. He also mentioned the possibility of initiating discreet negotiations with Western countries, explaining that since Pezeshkian took office in August last year, there have been plans to sign a long-term agreement with Europe, akin to deals with China and Russia.

The lawmaker also suggested that the president consults with the

parliamentary committees before negotiating with other countries, explaining that any agreement must be approved by the parliament, according to Iran's Constitution.

Since taking office in July, the Iranian president has repeatedly announced his government's readiness to hold talks with the Western countries to resolve their disputes over Iran's nuclear program.

In 2015, Iran and world powers - including France, Britain and Germany - reached an agreement that saw the easing of international sanctions on Tehran in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program.

But the United States unilaterally withdrew from the accord in 2018 and reimposed biting economic sanctions.

The European parties to the deal also failed to live up to their commitments under the deal.

In recent months, Iran and the three European powers have held two rounds of negotiations to resolve issues over Iran's nuclear program. Tensions between Iran and Europe-



Ahmad Bakhshayesh

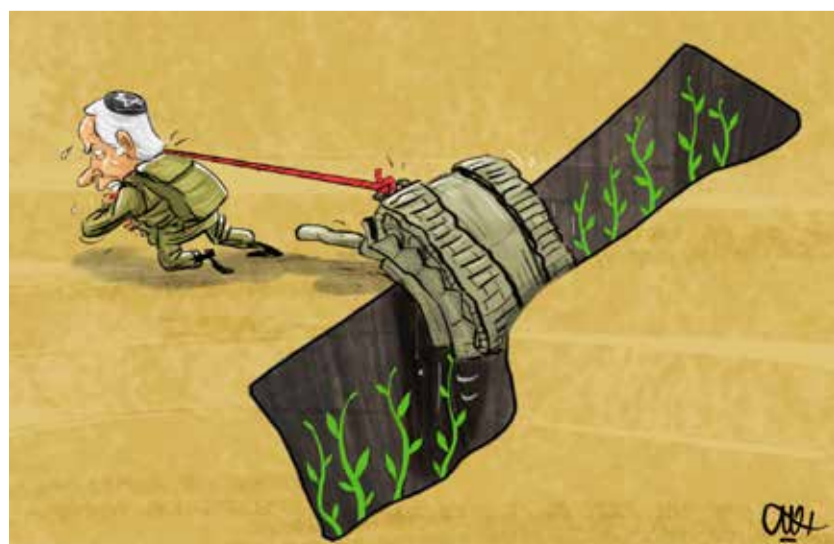
an countries escalated over the past two years due to European accusations of Iran's uranium enrichment as well as delivery of missiles and drones to Russia.

The European countries and the United States have also sanctioned several Iranian individuals and institutions over the issues.

European countries claim that Iran has supplied ballistic missiles to Russia for use in the Ukraine conflict, an allegation that Tehran has categorically rejected.

Despite tensions between Tehran and the European countries, the Pezeshkian administration has repeatedly called for talks with the West to settle differences.

Mohammad Ali Rajabi
Cartoonist



Resistance's blows forced ...

Politically speaking, the future of Hamas is a bone of contention. Some argue that Hamas should lay down its arms and operate as a political force while others believe it should keep up the resistance. Despite claims that Palestinian resistance has weakened, Hamas has recently fired rockets toward the Gaza envelope, proving it is still very much in the game. Hamas remains an active player with its members operating both on the ground and underground, despite Israel's advanced capabilities.

As the war in Gaza draws to a close and a cease-fire is declared, it is crucial

to note that many Israeli political and military officials are trying to wriggle out of their security and judicial responsibilities as well as the political and military orders they issued over the past 16 months. These individuals, aware of the looming threat of criminal prosecution, are quick to shift the entire blame for the war onto Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. On the flip side, outgoing US President Joe Biden has pumped tens of billions of dollars into Israel since the Israeli war on Gaza broke out, and this, coupled with Democratic support for Israel's atrocities, could become a political weapon for incoming President

Donald Trump and the Republicans to bash the Biden administration. This is why the US president-elect has made it clear that he will not let the Israeli prime minister take unilateral military action against Gaza without Washington's green light, as has been the case in the past.

While some might attribute the Gaza cease-fire agreement to Trump's threats, the reality is that Hamas and other resistance groups have been hitting back hard against Israel over the past year, exacting a heavy toll. However, both Biden and Trump are eager to take credit for brokering the cease-fire deal.