

# 2nd phase of Gaza cease-fire deal frees 200 Palestinians, four Israeli soldiers

## International Desk

Palestinian resistance movement Hamas and Israel implemented the second phase of a cease-fire deal in Gaza, which saw the release of hundreds of Palestinian inmates and several Israeli captives on Saturday. As part of the exchange, the second since the truce took effect last Sunday, four freed Israeli women captives, all soldiers, arrived home in Israel after more than 15 months of captivity in Gaza. In exchange, Israel's prison service confirmed that 200 Palestinian prisoners were freed. The Israeli captives, Karina Arieiev, 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. Soon after, buses carrying released Palestinian prisoners were seen departing from the Israeli Ofer military prison in the occupied West Bank. The releases on either side were welcomed by cheering crowds, including Israelis gathered in Tel Aviv and Palestin-

ians assembled in Ramallah. As dozens of the former prisoners reached the West Bank city, crowds of Palestinians erupted in joy, lifting many of them onto their shoulders. 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 on Saturday said it would block such returns until civilian woman captive 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." The truce has brought a surge of food, fuel, medical and other aid into the rubble-strewn Gaza Strip.



A Palestinian prisoner released by Israel gestures as he is surrounded by people cheering after disembarking from one of the buses of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Ramallah in the occupied West Bank on January 25, 2025. **● ZAIN JAAFAR/AFP**

The captive-prisoner exchange is part of a cease-fire agreement between Israel and Hamas that took effect on January 19 is intended to pave the way for a permanent end to the devastating war. The cease-fire agreement should be implemented in three phases, but the last two stages have not yet been finalized. During the first, 42-day phase, the 33 captives Israel believes are still alive should be freed in staggered releases in exchange for around 1,900 Palestinians held in Israeli jails. Three female captives returned home on the first day of the truce in exchange for 90 Palestinians. Israel launched the war on Gaza after the Palestinian resistance movement Hamas launched the surprise Operation Al-Aq-



sa Flood against the occupying entity on October 7, 2023 in response to the regime's decades-long campaign of blood-letting and devastation against

Palestinians. More than 1,200 people were killed in Hamas' operation against Israel. Israel's strikes on Gaza have

also killed more than 47,000 Palestinians. Almost the entire Gaza population of 2.4 million has been displaced by the war.

## Pakistan welcomes Iran's participation in AMAN-25 naval drill

### International Desk

The Chief of the Naval Staff of the Pakistan Navy welcomed the participation of Iran's Navy in the international naval drill, dubbed AMAN-25, which is scheduled to be held in Pakistan's port city of Karachi in February. Pakistan deeply appreciates and thanks the Iranian Navy for its continuous presence in the past rounds of the AMAN naval exercise, said Admiral Naveed Ashraf in an interview with IRNA. Islamabad enjoys constructive interactions with Tehran, he said, adding that Pakistan is eagerly ready to increase this cooperation with neighboring Iran. During the official visit of the Chief of the General Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Major General Mo-

hammad Baqeri to Islamabad, Pakistan presented an official invitation to Iran to participate in the multinational exercise AMAN-25. "We have a lot to learn from each other in maritime issues, and about the upcoming AMAN-25, the Pakistan Navy looks forward to close cooperation and establishing stronger relations with Iran," Ashraf added. The current level of relations between the two navies is "satisfactory," he underlined. AMAN exercises are held every two years. This year's drill is scheduled to be held from February 7-11. General Baqeri recently visited Pakistan, during which he said the Armed Forces of Iran and Pakistan should further cooperate to fight terrorist and separatist groups and improve secu-

rity at the common border. Baqeri stressed the need to strongly safeguard border areas between Iran and Pakistan "because the enemies seek to exploit our borders and we need more cooperation and coordination." In a meeting with Pakistan's Army chief Lieutenant General Asim Munir, Baqeri said confronting the terrorist groups must continue with seriousness. The Pakistani army chief, for his part, said that Islamabad is taking necessary and urgent measures to stop terrorist activities. The common border between the two countries have been the scene of many terrorist attacks in recent years, which have claimed the lives of a number of Iranian and Pakistani security forces.

## Leader's aide hopes for reaching 'reasonable solution' to FATF case

### National Desk

Ali Larijani, an advisor to Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei and a member of Iran's Expediency Council, expressed hope for reaching a reasonable solution to two conventions of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) after the council had decided to re-examine them two weeks earlier. Larijani said a joint committee had been formed within the Expediency Council to review the anti-money laundering and terrorism financing conventions adopted by the FATF. He made the remarks during a visit to IRNA on Saturday. Larijani, who served as parliament speaker from 2008 to 2020, said the council's members have different views on the issue. However, he hoped that the final decision will benefit the country and the members reach a reasonable solution in this regard. Back in January 12, the Expediency Council began to revisit various clauses of the Palermo and the Combating the Financing of Terrorism (CFT) conventions after Iran's Economy Minister Abdolnasser Hemmati said in December that the country's top leadership had allowed renewed discussions on FATF conventions in the council several years after the body stopped such debates fearing that the conventions may undermine Iran's financial independence.



Ali Larijani, a member of Iran's Expediency Council, talks with reporters during a visit to IRNA headquarters in Tehran on January 25, 2025. **● IRNA**

FATF restrictions imposed on Iran's banking system will be removed once the country enacts the Palermo and CFT conventions. The Iranian parliament has approved both but Iran's Guardian Council, which is responsible for vetting parliament legislation, has refused to ratify them, citing the need for some amendments. Iran has ratified other conventions and regulations adopted by the FATF. The renewed push to examine Iran's full accession to the FATF comes amid efforts by President Masoud Pezeshkian and his administration to open up to the world and to improve an economy affected by global inflation and foreign sanctions. In his presidential election campaign in mid-summer, Pezeshkian criticized the lack of action on FATF issues.

**Mohammad Ali Rajabi**  
Cartoonist



## Time to 'strike ...

Even the US, the top economic powerhouse, is pursuing a trillion-dollar investment from Saudi Arabia. Therefore, Iran is no exception especially given the fact that its infrastructure is aging because of sanctions that have discouraged investment. Trump might be aiming for an agreement that also benefits the US economically. During his first term, he joked that France had a right to oppose US sanctions on Iran since its carmakers had invested in Iran. He repeatedly labeled the JCPOA as a "bad deal" and once came clean it did not have economic perks for the US. It is no secret that Iran requires hundreds of billions of dollars in investment for its economic sectors. For instance, the oil industry alone needs over \$200 bil-

lion, according to officials, and attracting such financing under sanctions sounds like a mission impossible. Another positive signal being sent from Trump 2.0 is that he seems to be sidelining hardliners. He recently launched a scathing attack on his former national security advisor John Bolton, calling him a "dumb." Bolton was the same hawk who advocated striking Iran in a 2015 opinion published in the New York Times titled "To Stop Iran's Bomb, Bomb Iran." Brian Hook, one of the architects of the previous administration's sanctions regime on Iran, was fired on Trump's first day in office. Mike Pompeo, the former hawkish secretary of state, failed to make his way into the new administration. Last but not least, Trump does not have a regime change policy on Iran as he said

mid-October. "We can't get totally involved in all that. We can't run ourselves, let's face it," Trump said at the time. Contrary to expectations, Trump is currently talking about a deal instead of threatening Iran. A window of opportunity has opened for Tehran and Washington to iron out some of their differences. But both sides should be realistic. A comprehensive agreement between Iran and the US is just wishful thinking. However, hardliners on both sides should not be allowed to scuttle a deal on a stumbling block that safeguards Iran's rights. This might be the last chance to bring Iran fully back into global trade, so it is crucial to 'strike while the iron is hot' for the good of Iran's national interests and its resilient people.