CANADA & WORLD

ISRAEL-HAMAS CONFLICT

Hamas frees two Israeli women

U.S. advises delay in ground attack to allow for talks in effort to secure release of more captives

NAJIB JOBAIN, SAMY MAGDY AND JOSEPH KRAUSS

RAFAH, GAZA STRIP Hamas released two elderly Israeli women held hostage in Gaza on Monday, as the United States expressed increasing concern that the escalating Israel-Hamas war will spark a wider conflict in the region, including attacks on American troops.

The death toll in Gaza was rising rapidly as Israel ramped up airstrikes, flattening residential buildings in what it says was preparation for an eventual ground assault. The United States advised Israel to delay an expected ground invasion to allow time to negotiate the release of more hostages.

A third small aid convoy from Egypt entered Gaza, where the population of 2.3 million has been running out of food, water and medicine under Israel's two-week seal. With Israel still barring entry of fuel, the UN said its distribution of aid would grind to a halt within days when it can no longer fuel its trucks. Gaza hospitals are struggling to keep generators running to power life-saving medical equipment and incubators for premature babies.

The release of the two hostages, 85-year-old Yocheved Lifshitz and 79-year-old Nurit Cooper, was confirmed by the International Committee of the Red Cross. The two women, along with their husbands, were snatched from their homes in the kibbutz of Nir Oz near the Gaza border in Hamas' Oct. 7 rampage through towns of southern Israel. Their husbands were not released.

In a statement, Hamas said it had released them for humanitarian reasons. Hamas and other militants in Gaza are believed to have taken roughly 220 people, including an unconfirmed number of foreigners and dual nationals. Hamas released an American woman and her teenage daughter last week.

Israel is widely expected to launch a ground offensive in Gaza, vowing to destroy Hamas after its brutal Oct. 7 rampage. That is raising fears of the war spreading beyond Gaza and Israel, as Iranian-backed fighters in the region are warning of possible escalation, including targeting U.S. forces deployed in the Mideast.

The U.S. has told Iranian-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon and other groups not to join the fight. Israel has frequently traded fire with Hezbollah, and Israeli warplanes have struck targets in the occupied West Bank, Syria and Lebanon in recent days.

LEON NEAL GETTY IMAGES

An Israeli military strike on buildings in Gaza City, as seen from the border area on Monday near Sderot Israel.

National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said there had been an uptick in rocket and drone attacks by Iranian-backed militias on U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria, and the U.S. was "deeply concerned about the possibility for any significant escalation" in attacks in coming days.

He said U.S. officials were having "active conversations" with Israeli counterparts about the potential ramifications of escalated military action.

The U.S. advised Israeli officials that delaying a ground offensive would give Washington more time to work with regional mediators on securing the release of more hostages taken by Hamas, according to a U.S. official.

On Monday the Palestinian Red Crescent said 20 trucks entered Gaza carrying food, water, medicine and medical supplies, through the Rafah crossing with Egypt, the only way into Gaza not controlled by Israel. It was the third delivery in as many days, each around the same size.

Palestinians unload boxes of medicine from a truck that arrived at Nasser Medical Complex, as part of the aid batch that entered into the Gaza Strip.

MOHAMMED DAHMAN THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The aid coming in so far is "a drop in the ocean" compared to the needs of the population, said Thomas White, the Gaza director of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA. The UN has said 20 trucks amounts to four per cent of an average day's imports before the war and that hundreds of trucks a day are needed.

White said the agency had only three days of fuel left for its trucks. The supplies coming through Rafah are reloaded onto UNRWA and the Red Crescent trucks to take to hospitals and UN schools in the south of Gaza, where hundreds of thousands of people are taking shelter, running low on food and largely drinking contaminated water.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

'Everything you can think of has been hit'

Canadian in Gaza says Israeli airstrikes have now become relentless ahead of ground invasion

FAKIHA BAIG

Mansour Shouman said he used to hear Israel airstrikes in Gaza roughly every hour but those bombardments now come every few minutes as the Israel-Hamas war escalates.

The 39-year-old Canadian, who has been living in Gaza, said Israel's bombardment of the Palestinian territory has grown relentless recently, and even locations where civilians were previously advised to take refuge are not safe.

"It's still going ... Every few minutes," he said of the airstrikes during a video call Monday as the sound of explosions could be heard in the background. "Gaza is a very congested place so everything you can think of has been hit."

Israel is expected to launch a ground offensive in Gaza and said it has stepped up airstrikes in order to reduce the risk to troops in the next stages.

Shouman — who was born in Gaza, later moved to Calgary and then moved with his family back to Gaza in 2006 — said he narrowly escaped an airstrike on Monday morning near a hospital complex where he has been taking shelter.

"At the entrance of the hospital a bomb fell," he said while sitting under a tent in the southern Gaza city of Khan Yunis, pointing at the entrance metres away from him.

Shouman said people he knew at the hospital had lost loved ones in recent days and many around him lacked essential supplies.

"I have here a couple of colleagues whose homes were bombed," he said. "They went and put (their family) in the graves and came back to work."

Small shipments of aid — which the UN has said were a small fraction of the usual supplies Gaza receives — were twice allowed into Gaza over the weekend and once on Monday, but have barely made a dent in the massive need for essentials, Shouman said.

"People are malnourished," he said. "How can it get it better? There is no replenishment of stuff."

Israel has still not allowed any fuel to enter Gaza, where there has been a power blackout for nearly two weeks since Hamas' Oct. 7 rampage into southern Israeli communities. Hamas has said the attack was retribution for worsening conditions Palestinians face.

Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant told troops near Gaza to keep preparing for an offensive "because it will come." He said it will be a combined offensive from air, land and sea but did not give a time frame. A ground excursion is likely to dramatically increase casualties in what is already the deadliest by far of five wars fought between Israel and Hamas in less than 15 years.

More than 1,400 people in Israel have been killed — mostly civilians slain during the initial Hamas attack. At least 222 people were captured and taken to Gaza, including foreigners, the military said Monday, updating a previous figure.

> **People are malnourished. How can it get it better? There is no replenishment of stuff.**
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> MANSOUR SHOUMAN CANADIAN IN GAZA

More than 5,000 Palestinians, including some 2,000 minors and around 1,100 women, have been killed, the Hamas-run Health Ministry said Monday. That includes the disputed toll from an explosion at a hospital last week.

Canadian officials are still working to try and find a way to get upwards of 400 Canadians and their families out of the Gaza Strip, which is blockaded at its two land borders with Israel and Egypt.

In Gaza, Shouman said he hasn't heard from the Canadian embassy in days. He said his family is taking shelter elsewhere while he tries to help at the hospital complex.

He said he was angry at the suffering he was seeing and wanted to raise awareness of the humanitarian toll the war is taking.

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