

# As Gaza Battle Goes On, Israel Is Set to Negotiate With Egypt on Cease-Fire

By STEVEN ERLANGER

JERUSALEM — Israel said Wednesday that it would send senior officials to talk with Egypt about halting the conflict in Gaza, but there were no immediate signs of a diplomatic breakthrough. Fighting between Israel and Hamas militants continued after a brief pause earlier in the day.

International pressure for a negotiated cease-fire intensified a day after Israeli shells killed some 40 people at a United Nations school in Gaza. Israel said Hamas militants had fired mortar shells from the school compound prior to Israel's shelling.

Israel suspended its military operations in Gaza for three hours on Wednesday to allow humanitarian aid and fuel for power generation to reach Gazans, who used the afternoon break to shop.

But fighting resumed soon afterward. In the evening, the Israeli Army dropped leaflets warning the citizens of Rafah, next to the border with Egypt, to leave their homes. Israel has been bombing the tunnel networks through which arms and consumer goods are smuggled from Egypt into Gaza.

Hamas fired 22 rockets into Israel, but no one was wounded.

The Israeli government said it welcomed the efforts of France and Egypt to work out a durable cease-fire. It said it would end its assault if Hamas stopped firing rockets into Israel and ended the smuggling of weapons from Egypt. It said that if a durable cease-fire took hold, it would reopen border crossings into Gaza for goods and people. But Israeli and Hamas officials both denied an assertion by the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, that a cease-fire had been agreed upon.

"There is an agreement on general principles, that Hamas should stop rocket fire and mustn't rearm," a senior Israeli official said Wednesday evening. "But that's like agreeing that motherhood is a good thing. We have to transform those agreed principles into working procedures on the ground, and that's barely begun."

The government spokesman, Mark Regev, said that "the challenge now is to get the details to match the principles."

There were early signs that a formal diplomatic negotiation could begin after 12 days of fighting. Egypt's chief of intelligence,



A woman in Rafah, Gaza, ventured into the rubble-strewn streets on Wednesday. Israel suspended its assault for three hours to allow humanitarian deliveries. EYAD BABA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

## On 12th day, a brief lull in fighting and efforts to work out how to end a conflict.

Omar Suleiman, is expected to serve as a go-between for Israel and Hamas. Two Israeli officials — a senior aide to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Shalom Turgeman, and a senior defense official, Amos Gilad — are expected to go to Egypt on Thursday to begin discussions, Israeli officials said.

The United States has been involved behind the scenes, senior Israeli and French officials said, with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice "constantly on the phone" with Mr. Olmert, according to one Israeli official.

In Washington, the White House spokeswoman, Dana M. Perino, said of talks about a cease-fire: "As I understand, the Israelis are open to the concept, but they want to learn more

about the details; so do we."

At the United Nations, several Arab states pressed for a binding Security Council resolution calling for an immediate cease-fire. But the United States and other Western powers called for a non-binding resolution on halting the violence.

A senior French official in Paris said that Mr. Sarkozy's earlier comment about an agreement on a cease-fire was misunderstood: "The plan is not a cease-fire; the plan is a road map toward a cease-fire." One crucial aspect of any deal is how to prevent new smuggling tunnels from being built under Egypt's border with Gaza.

The senior Israeli official raised the possibility of reaching "tacit agreements" with Hamas to end rocket fire, while also persuading Egypt to allow American and perhaps European army engineers to help seal its border with Gaza above and below ground.

Hamas is insisting that any new arrangement include the re-

opening of border crossings for trade with Israel and the reopening of the Rafah crossing into Egypt for people.

President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt has said that a 2005 agreement on the Rafah crossing, reached with Israel and the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas of Fatah, must be respected. That agreement called for a Palestinian Authority presence at the crossing, supervision by European Union monitors and Israeli video surveillance of who entered and left.

Hamas wants to control the crossing itself and is not eager to cooperate with Fatah, its rival.

In Washington, President-elect Barack Obama said Wednesday that upon taking office he would "engage immediately" in the Middle East crisis and that he was "deeply concerned" about the loss of life on both sides.

"I am doing everything that we have to do to make sure that the day I take office we are prepared to engage immediately in trying to deal with the situation there,"

he said at a press conference. "Not only the short-term situation but building a process whereby we can achieve a more lasting peace in the region."

In Gaza, John Ging, the director of Gazan operations for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, visited the school in the Jabaliya refugee camp where Israeli shells fell Tuesday. He denied that Hamas militants had fired mortar shells from within the school compound and called for an international investigation into the attack, which he said had killed 40 people.

Israeli officials said they were continuing to investigate, but reiterated that Hamas had been using the school as a base. Mr. Gilad, the defense official, told Israeli Army radio: "This school served as a base for Hamas men whose identity we know. They fired from inside the school compound, and the army fired back at the source. The time was after school hours, and this school is an example of the cynical and cruel use Hamas does with civil-

ian facilities."

Casualty figures are hard to verify, but officials at Shifa Hospital in Gaza City and the Gazan Ministry of Health said 683 Palestinians had died since the conflict began Dec. 27, including 218 children and 90 women. They said 3,085 had been wounded. The Palestinian Center for Human Rights in Gaza said 130 children age 16 or under had died. The United Nations estimated a few days ago that a quarter of the dead were civilians.

But Palestinian residents and Israeli officials say that Hamas is tending its own wounded in separate medical centers, not in public hospitals, and that it is difficult to know the number of dead Hamas fighters, many of whom were not wearing uniforms.

Israel says it has killed at least 130 Hamas fighters. Ten Israelis have been killed during the offensive, including three civilians. Most of the seven dead Israeli soldiers were killed in so-called friendly fire.

## Gazans Express Grief and Rage Over Deaths Outside U.N. School

By TAGHREED EL-KHODARY

JABALIYA, Gaza — The bodies of the children who died outside the United Nations school here were laid out in a long row on the ground. Some were wrapped in the vivid green flag of Hamas, some were in white shrouds, and some were in the yellow flag of Fatah, which is rarely seen these days in Hamas-run Gaza.

Hundreds of Gazans crowded around, staring at the little faces, some of them with dark eyes still open, but dulled.

Abdel Minaim Hasan, 37, knelt, weeping, next to the body of his eldest daughter, Lina, 11, who was wrapped in a Hamas flag. "From now on I am Hamas!" he cried. "I choose resistance!" But

then he cursed Arab nations for ignoring the plight of the Gazans. "The Arabs are doing nothing to protect us!" he shouted.

The streets were crowded Tuesday evening when the mortar shells struck, Mr. Hasan said. "We were in a United Nations school, we were so far from the tanks." There were many children around, and he gave Lina a shekel to run to a nearby grocery store. She was hit by shrapnel and died.

Some 280 families — 1,674 people — had been seeking shelter inside the school, Al Fakhura, according to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which helps Palestinian refugees and their descendants and which

away. Israeli forces ordered them to evacuate their homes for their own safety.

But Al Fakhura, set in the northern part of the densely packed Jabaliya refugee camp north of Gaza City, is in a crowded neighborhood full of Hamas fighters. Israel said that a preliminary investigation showed that mortar fire from the school compound prompted Israeli forces to return fire. The Israeli mortar rounds killed as many as 40 people outside the school; Palestinian hospital officials said Tuesday that 10 of the dead were children and 5 were women.

Residents of the neighborhood said two brothers who were Hamas fighters were in the area at

But the residents also said the mortar fire had not come from the school compound, but from elsewhere in the neighborhood.

The director of the United Nations relief agency in Gaza, John Ging, who was not at the school when it was attacked, denied that Hamas fighters had been taking shelter in the school or using its premises. "There are no military people inside the school; it is fully controlled," he said.

Mr. Ging put the death toll at 40 and said 15 more people were critically wounded and 40 others less seriously wounded. He called for an international investigation. "Those who died or were injured deserve accountability," he said.

Mr. Ging spoke at the school

er day to allow humanitarian organizations to deliver supplies and Gazans to emerge from their houses and shelters to shop.

But while there is food, Gazans are running out of cash to buy it, with banks shut and A.T.M.'s empty and nonfunctional because of a lack of electricity.

The lull was also used for funerals, and a senior Hamas official, Mushir al-Masri, emerged from hiding to congratulate those he called martyrs. Some parents shook his hand; some stared at him coldly. On a loudspeaker, a man praised the dead and said: "What Israel is doing is bringing us unity again! We are all together!"

That idea appeared to explain



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The school is in Jabaliya, a densely populated area.

people in every classroom, that