



By: **Sharmila Devi**

Peace and reconstruction still distant in Gaza five weeks into ceasefire



A bloody and potentially critical point in Gaza's five-week "ceasefire" was reached this week when Israel killed at least 25 Palestinians in **air strikes**, saying it struck " Hamas terrorist targets".

Hamas said it was a "dangerous escalation" that could jeopardise the ceasefire, during which Israel has killed 280 people, says Gaza's health ministry.

Another spanner was thrown into the creaking gears of Middle East diplomacy with news that US special envoy **Steve Witkoff** cancelled a meeting with Hamas negotiator Khalil al-Hayya after pressure from Israel, according to Israeli press reports.

The full reconstruction and recovery of Gaza, along with a durable end to the conflict, appears increasingly likely to remain a lofty and distant goal.

The "yellow line" and the future of Gaza's division

The Witkoff and Hayya meeting on Wednesday was supposed to discuss "practical implementation" of Donald Trump's Gaza deal, including an international stabilisation force (ISF) and a transitional administration, which were approved in a UN Security Council vote.

Countries have yet to commit troops to the international stabilisation force, no one knows who will sit on the "Board of Peace" to be chaired by Trump himself, Hamas remains reluctant to disarm, and Israel remains vehemently opposed to a Palestinian state.

Meanwhile, the de facto partition of Gaza between Israel and Hamas along what is dubbed the "yellow line" looks likely to be entrenched while Gaza's 2.1 million people live amid rubble and floods caused by the onset of winter rains.

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Instead of a full **Israeli withdrawal** from Gaza and the restoration of Palestinian unity, Washington views the presence of Israeli forces in more than half of the territory and a permanently divided Gaza as the most probable scenario, according to documents leaked to The Guardian last week.

But Trump proclaimed that Monday's UN vote was a watershed moment after two years of war, which killed almost 70,000 Palestinians.

"This will go down as one of the biggest approvals in the History of the United Nations, will lead to further Peace all over the World, and is a moment of true Historic proportion!" **Trump** posted on social media.

China and Russia abstained in the 13-0 vote in which the Palestinians and Arab countries managed to persuade the US to include language about Palestinian self-determination in the resolution. But no timeline or guarantee on statehood was given.

Lukewarm regional support for the ISF

In a joint statement released by **Hamas** and other factions in Gaza, they rejected the proposed ISF, which is supposed to "demilitarise" Gaza.

Hamas and the others said the ISF "will turn into a type of imposed guardianship or administration – reproducing a reality that restricts the Palestinian people's right to self-determination and to managing their own affairs".

It seems many countries in the region fear the same, and none has formally committed any troops to the ISF, which is supposed to

number up to 20,000, and Trump expecting that Arab and Muslim countries to contribute the most.

Egypt, Qatar and the UAE have expressed only lukewarm interest so far - perhaps fearing their outright rejection would anger Trump.

Indonesia and Azerbaijan have made offers, according to a Trump official, while Turkey's offer has been rejected by Israel because of tensions between the two countries.

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Trump's soaring pronouncements are again hitting hard against reality, but for now at least, his deal is being met with hopeful responses.

Even though the Palestinian Authority (PA) - nominally in charge in the West Bank - has been excluded by Trump's deal from Gaza, it said UN resolution 2803 was a necessary first step.

Varsen Aghabekian Shahin, **PA foreign minister**, even seemed to go along with Washington's vision of Palestinian statehood being only possible after PA reforms were carried out.

"As long as these elements are in there, we're happy with this first step," Shahin said.

Palestinians are also excluded from the US-led Civil-Military Co-ordination Centre in southern Israel, where hundreds of American and Israeli troops and international officials are busy making plans for the reconstruction of Gaza.

It appears many of the officials are on a steep learning curve. "What is Hamas?" was the title of one briefing session for newcomers to the centre, according to the **New York Times**.

An "historic" deal for Gaza

In addition, it is not known who else apart from Trump will sit on the Board of Peace, supposed to be responsible for Gaza's day-to-day running until at least the end of 2027, the timeframe for the PA taking over. **Tony Blair**, presumably, is still hoping for a role, but nothing has been confirmed.



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Further disturbing for many **Palestinians** who worry about the transfer of Gazans out of the Strip is the arrival of 153 Palestinians in South Africa last week, organised by a shadowy organisation called Al Majd Europe.

Palestinian passengers who travelled with Al-Majd to South Africa told journalists they were paid between \$1,500 and \$2,000 that was sent to their personal accounts.

An investigation by the Israeli newspaper Haaretz found that Al-Majd is connected to Tomer Jamar Lind, an individual with dual Israeli-Estonian citizenship based in London.

Concern has been raised the organisation is part of an Israeli plan to remove many Palestinians from Gaza.

It is not known how many Palestinians have left but the only certainty is that Israel would have had to co-operate to facilitate their flights.

Forcible transfer of a population is a crime

against humanity under international law. But this will not deter Washington as it embarks on what it still views as an “Historic” deal for Gaza.