



By: TA | AP Insight

The remains of last hostage in Gaza returned to Israel, clearing the way for the next phase of the ceasefire



Israel said Monday it had recovered the remains of the last hostage in Gaza, closing a painful chapter for the country and clearing the way for the next and more challenging phase of its **ceasefire** with Hamas.

The next step is likely to be the reopening of **Gaza's border with Egypt**, enabling Palestinians to move in both directions and more aid to enter the territory devastated by two years of war.

The ceasefire's second phase also calls for deploying an international security force, disarming Hamas, pulling back Israeli soldiers and rebuilding Gaza.

The remains of police officer **Ran Gvili** were found in a cemetery in northern Gaza.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called it "an incredible achievement" for Israel and its soldiers. He said Gvili, who was killed during the Hamas-led attack on Oct. 7, 2023, that sparked the war, was among the first to be taken into Gaza.

"We have completed this mission, as I promised, and we will complete the other missions we have set," Netanyahu said Monday while addressing the Israeli parliament.

Dozens of people, including relatives, military officials and friends from Gvili's police unit, received his coffin at an army post on the Israeli side of the border with Gaza.

Many more Israelis lined nearby roads to pay their respects as a convoy carrying the coffin made its way to Tel Aviv.

"You should see the honor you're receiving here," Gvili's father, Itzik, said, kissing his son's coffin, which was draped in an Israeli flag. "The entire police is here with you, the entire army is with you, the entire people. I'm proud of you."

The return of all remaining hostages, living or dead, had been a key part of the Gaza ceasefire's first phase. Gvili's family had urged Israel's government not to enter the **second**

phase until his remains were recovered and returned.

Hamas said it now has committed to all terms of the ceasefire's first phase.

Netanyahu's office said Sunday that once the search for Gvili was finished, Israel would open the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt, which Palestinians see as their lifeline to the world. It has been largely shut since May 2024, except for a short period early last year.

The ceasefire's next phase will confront thornier issues, including transitioning to a new governance structure in Gaza and disarming Hamas, which has ruled the territory for nearly two decades.

"The next phase is disarming Hamas and demilitarizing the Gaza Strip. The next phase is not reconstruction," Netanyahu said.

Palestinians react to recovery of last hostage's remains

Palestinians in Gaza were optimistic that opening the Rafah crossing will allow travel to and from the enclave along with the evacuation of people needing medical care.

"We hope this will close off Israel's pretexts and open the crossing," said Abdel-Rahman Radwan, a Gaza City resident whose mother is a cancer patient and requires treatment outside Gaza.

Ahmed Ruqab, a father who lives with his family of six in a tent in the Nuseirat refugee camp, called for mediators and the U.S. to pressure Israel to allow more aid and caravans into Gaza.

"We need to turn this page and restart," he said over the phone.

Israel and Hamas had been under pressure from the U.S. and other ceasefire mediators to move into the second phase of the truce that took effect on Oct. 10.

Gvili's relatives last week repeated calls for Israel's government and U.S. President Donald Trump to ensure the release of his remains.

Gvili's remains were found right along the "yellow line" dividing Gaza just on the Israeli side

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt in a social media post called Monday's development "incredible news."

"Most thought of it as an impossible thing to do," Trump posted.

Israel had repeatedly accused Hamas of dragging its feet in the recovery of Gvili's remains. Hamas said it had provided all the information it had, accusing Israel of obstructing the efforts.

Gvili's remains were found right along the "yellow line" dividing Gaza just on the Israeli side, according to a military official, speaking anonymously under army protocol.

The October 2023 attack on Israel that launched the war killed about 1,200 people and saw 251 taken hostage. Gvili, a 24-year-old police officer known affectionately as "Rani," was killed while fighting Hamas militants.

Before Gvili's remains were recovered, 20 living hostages and the remains of 27 others had been returned to Israel since the ceasefire, most recently in early December. Israel in exchange has released the bodies of hundreds of Palestinians to Gaza.

In a symbolic act, Israeli President Isaac Herzog on Monday removed a yellow pin worn by many Israeli citizens and public figures since the early months of the war to show solidarity with the hostages and their families.

Hundreds of Palestinians killed in Gaza since the ceasefire

Palestinians in Gaza who spoke to The

Associated Press in recent weeks questioned whether moving into phase two of the ceasefire will improve conditions on the ground, pointing to ongoing bloodshed and challenges securing basic necessities.

Israeli forces on Monday fatally shot two people in Gaza, according to hospitals that received the bodies. One man was close to the area where the military was searching for Gvili, according to Shifa Hospital.

Israel's offensive has killed more than 71,400 Palestinians since 2023, according to Gaza's Health Ministry — with more than 480 Palestinians killed by Israeli fire since the latest ceasefire began. The ministry, which is part of the

Hamas-led government, maintains detailed casualty records that are seen as generally reliable by U.N. agencies and independent experts.

Israel's top court considers petition to open Gaza for international journalists

The Foreign Press Association on Monday asked Israel's Supreme Court to allow journalists to enter Gaza freely and independently.



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The FPA, which represents dozens of global

news organizations, has been fighting for more than two years for independent media access to Gaza.

Israel has barred reporters from entering Gaza independently since the 2023 attacks by Hamas, saying entry could put journalists and soldiers at risk.

The army has offered journalists brief visits under strict military supervision.

FPA lawyers told the three judge panel that the restrictions are not justified and that with aid workers moving in and out of Gaza, journalists should be allowed in.

They also said the tightly controlled embeds with the military are no substitute for independent access. The judges are expected to rule soon.