**Arab League urges 'all parties' to back Egypt's Gaza truce plan**

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CAIRO: Arab foreign ministers in Cairo early Tuesday called on “all parties” to accept an Egyptian proposal to end the raging conflict between Israel and Hamas, after the Palestinian militant group signalled its rejection of the truce.

The ministers, meeting for an extraordinary Arab League session, also backed a Palestinian demand for “international protection.”

Hours before the meeting, Cairo announced a proposal for a cease-fire that would begin Tuesday, saying it was willing to host high-level Israeli and Palestinian delegations for talks after a truce went into effect.

At least 186 Palestinians have been killed in Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip as the conflict entered its eighth day.

Israel says its air strikes are in response to Hamas rocket fire on its cities, which have mostly been blown out of the sky by Israeli interceptor missiles without causing any deaths.

The Arab foreign ministers “demand all parties concerned accept the Egyptian initiative” and commit to its terms, they said in a statement after the meeting.

The proposal came as Egyptian state media reported that US Secretary of State John Kerry was due in Cairo to discuss an end to the hostilities, and after Washington warned Israel against a ground invasion of Gaza.

Hamas’ demands

Hamas appeared to reject the idea, with spokesman Fawzi Barhum saying the group would not accept a truce without a full-fledged deal to end hostilities.

Hamas officials say they will not accept "calm for calm." The group is demanding an easing of an Israeli-Egyptian blockade that has ground Gaza's economy to a standstill and that Israel release dozens of prisoners who were arrested in a recent West Bank crackdown following the abductions of the Israeli youths.

With the death toll mounting, both sides have come under increasing international pressure to halt the fighting.

Egypt Foreign Minister Sameh Shukri said there is "no alternative but return to the truce" of November 2012, and added that Egypt contacted all the parties, including the Palestinian leadership, different Palestinian factions, and Israeli authorities in addition to Arab and international parties. Such contacts led to shaping up the proposal which called for cease-fire.

"Egypt stresses the international responsibility toward what is happening in Palestine," he said.

In a speech broadcast on Al-Jazeera, Ismail Haniyeh, a Hamas leader in Gaza, confirmed there was "diplomatic movement."

"The problem is not going back to the agreement on calm because we want this aggression to stop," he said. "The siege must stop and Gaza people need to live in dignity."

Israel to weigh proposal

An Israeli official said Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would convene his Security Cabinet on Tuesday morning to discuss the proposal. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to the media.

Naftali Bennett, a member of the Security Cabinet, said he would oppose the proposal, calling it "good for Hamas and bad for Israel."

"A cease-fire at the present time shows the government's weakness," he said in a statement. "A cease-fire now will create a bigger campaign against the south of the country and more rocket attacks in another year."

Egypt, the first Arab state to reach peace with Israel, often serves as a mediator between Israel and Hamas.

In the 2012 fighting, Egypt's then-President Mohammed Morsi brokered a cease-fire, leveraging the influence his Muslim Brotherhood held with Hamas, its ally.

That deal included pledges to ease the blockade — promises that Hamas says were never kept. The blockade has greatly restricted movement through Gaza's Rafah crossing with Egypt — the territory's main gateway to the outside world — while Israel has restricted the flow of many goods, particularly much-needed construction materials, into Gaza. Israel says Hamas can use things like metal and concrete for military purposes.

Hamas has seen its position further weakened by last year's military coup in Egypt that ousted Mursi. Egypt's new leaders have cracked down on Hamas by nearly shuttering a network of smuggling tunnels along the border that were Hamas' key economic lifeline — and supply route for its weapons.

Hamas seized control of Gaza in 2007 from the rival forces of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. With the economy stagnant and Hamas unable to pay the salaries of its thousands of civil servants, the group recently agreed to back a unity government under Abbas' leadership. But Hamas remains in firm control of Gaza.