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Israeli gunships await Gaza flotilla

PA

Israeli gunships were standing by today to stop a flotilla of pro-Palestinian activists from reaching the Gaza Strip, setting the stage for what could become a dramatic showdown on the high seas.

Foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman said the country was prepared to stop the flotilla "at any cost".

He called the aid mission a provocation and urged the international community to show understanding for the tough response.

"We really have all determination and political will to prevent this provocation against us," he said. "I think that we're ready at any cost ... to prevent this provocation."

Military officials said an initial group of gunships went out to sea yesterday to prepare for the flotilla's arrival. But plans to dispatch additional gunships were put on hold after reports that the flotilla had encountered mechanical problems.

The officials said the gunships would remain in port until the flotilla got closer.

The military said it would intercept the ships, escort the vessels to shore and give the activists the choice of deportation or going to jail.

Israel says that after a security check, it will transfer the cargo to Gaza through the United Nations.

Officials say they hope the situation will be resolved peacefully, but are prepared to use force if necessary. Masked naval commandos have been trained for the mission and Israel has built a large makeshift detention centre in a southern port to process the activists.

The activists, among them a Nobel peace laureate, are trying to draw attention to a three-year-old Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip imposed after Hamas militants violently seized control of the territory. They say they are carrying tons of desperately-needed humanitarian aid.

Greta Berlin, one of the organisers of the effort, said a total of seven ships were heading to Gaza after an eighth vessel suffered a malfunction and had to turn back.

The organisers' website said the flotilla remained off the southern coast of Cyprus, 250 miles north west of Gaza, last night. She said the flotilla would resume the journey today. It was unclear when they would reach Israeli waters, she added.

The ships originally embarked from Turkey, Greece and other European ports.

Israel says the Gaza blockade is needed to prevent Hamas, which has fired thousands of rockets into Israel, from rearming.

It rejects claims that a humanitarian crisis is brewing in Gaza, saying it allows more than enough food and medicine into the strip.

Critics, however, say the blockade has crushed Gaza's economy, eliminated some 100,000 jobs and prevented the territory from repairing the destruction caused by an Israeli military offensive early last year.

Israel has reached out to its Mediterranean neighbours to stop the flotilla from approaching. Turkey, whose president has harshly condemned Israel's Gaza offensive, has rejected the gesture.

A Turkish charity is spearheading the aid mission and Turkish authorities have refused to intervene.

But yesterday Cyprus said it was banning any ship from sailing to Gaza from its shores because organisers of a flotilla trying to break a blockade of the Palestinian territory ignored a government appeal not to involve the island.

Acting government spokesman Titos Christofides condemned the Israeli blockade and expressed solidarity with the Palestinian people, but said the appeal was made to protect the island's "vital interests".

This is the ninth time that the Free Gaza Movement, the pro-Palestinian organisation behind the effort, has sent a flotilla of supplies to Gaza.

Israel allowed five deliveries to reach Gaza, but has not allowed any ships through since its military offensive, which ended last January.

Among the passengers are Nobel Peace Prize laureate Mairead Corrigan Maguire, former US Rep Cynthia McKinney, a Holocaust survivor in her 80s, a retired US army colonel and politicians from a dozen European countries.

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Comments

Peter Sammut(3 hours, 2 minutes ago) 

Martin Cassar, Hamas are as democratic as Mintoff was.

Anyway Mr. Cassar your anti-Jewish tirades are like the proverbial donkey braying at the moon.

Martin Cassar(3 hours, 54 minutes ago) 

'The activists, among them a Nobel peace laureate, are trying to draw attention to a three-year-old Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip imposed after Hamas militants violently seized control of the territory. They say they are carrying tons of desperately-needed humanitarian aid.'

This piece of news is incorrect and misleading. Hamas was DEMOCRATICALLY elected in 2006, so says all EU delegation that was commissioned by the EU to observe the election process in the Palestinians occupied lands. But as usual, if one doesn't bow or surrender to the USA you are swiftly portrayed either as a terrorist or alienated. One really gets confused at this stage, when the USA dropped nuclear bombs that killed hundreds of thousands of innocents Japanese civilians, was the USA response an act of self defense or an act of terrorism?

Looks like after the entire world have seen Israel real terror face we are now about to see Israel' art of piracy!

MARGARET RICHARDS(11 hours, 35 minutes ago) 

Group with Terrorist Ties Attempts to Deliver Supplies to Gaza, Refuses to Deliver Letter to Captive Israeli Soldier.

A flotilla of pro-Palestinian demonstrators with links to terrorist groups is en route to the Gaza Strip in defiance of Israeli government requests to deliver their shipment through legal channels. Israel has appealed to the convoy of ships – which embarked from several European countries and is carrying more than 10,000 tons of humanitarian aid – to dock in Israel's southern port of Ashdod so its humanitarian supplies can be delivered by Israel through the Gaza border crossing after they are checked for dangerous materials.[2] However, the flotilla's organizers have refused to abide by Israel's request, constituting a violation of international maritime law. According to CNN, the organizers also declined a request by Noam Shalit, father of captive Israeli soldier Staff Sgt. Gilad Shalit, to deliver aid, medicine and a letter to his son who was kidnapped by Iran-backed Hamas on June 25, 2007.[4] Hamas has since barred the Red Cross or other humanitarian groups from visiting Shalit – a violation of the Geneva Convention.