



Gaza ceasefire in peril as Israel and Hamas hit impasse



The testing second stage of Gaza's ceasefire was always in doubt; now it seems to be dead at the moment it was meant to start. Concern is mounting that war will return to this ravaged territory, deepening the profound suffering of Palestinians and threatening the lives of the remaining hostages held by Hamas. Israel, backed by the United States, says there is a new deal now, after the agreement's first phase ended on Saturday. And it has halted all humanitarian aid to Gaza until Hamas accepts this new version too. "A flagrant violation," was Cairo's strongly worded response. Egypt as well as Qatar, the two Arab mediators in this process along with the US, have also accused Israel of violating international humanitarian law by "using food as a weapon of war". Under the terms of the agreement, 600 trucks carrying vital humanitarian aid are meant to enter Gaza daily - and huge numbers crossed through the 42 days of the first phase. There has also been a loud chorus of criticism from other Arab states, as well as humanitarian leaders. UN Secretary General António Guterres, who has arrived in Cairo for Tuesday's emergency Arab summit on rebuilding Gaza, called for the "immediate" resumption of assistance. He urged "all parties to make every effort to prevent a return to hostilities". Under the agreement, which came into effect on 19 January, this is the week when Israel should be pulling its troops from the Philadelphi corridor along the Egypt-Gaza border and negotiations should intensify to end the war, return all the remaining hostages, and release more Palestinian prisoners in exchange. But Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, says US envoy Steve Witkoff has come up with a new plan. Witkoff has not yet announced his proposal, but Netanyahu said the first stage of the ceasefire would be extended for another 50 days, to cover the Islamic holy month of Ramadan and the Jewish holiday of Passover, and to continue negotiations. Hamas, in exchange, would immediately release half of the remaining hostages, according to Netanyahu. Israel says 59 are still being held captive and "up to 24" are believed to be alive. On Monday Hamas denounced this sudden shift as a "a blatant attempt [by Israel] to evade the agreement and avoid entering into negotiations for the second Saturday. group regards the hostages as its most important leverage and will make every effort to hold on to them until this current confrontation ends on terms it is willing to accept.