

White House, Hill Leaders Say Hamas Must Stop Rocket Attacks

By Jonathan Broder
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Congressional leaders on both sides of the aisle rallied to Israel's cause Monday as it pressed forward with large-scale air attacks against Islamic militants in the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli offensive began on Dec. 27 after gunmen of the ruling Hamas party fired hundreds of rockets into Israel following the Dec. 19 end of a six-month truce.

"I strongly support Israel's right to defend its citizens against rocket and mortar attacks from Hamas-controlled Gaza, which have killed and injured Israeli citizens, and to restore security to its residents," said Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., in a statement Monday. "Hamas' failure to stop these attacks only exacerbates the humanitarian situation for the residents of Gaza and undermines efforts to attain peace and security in the region."

His view was echoed by leaders of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

"Israel has a right, indeed a duty, to defend itself in response to the hundreds of rockets and mortars fired from Gaza over the past week," Howard L. Berman, D-Calif., chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said in a statement. "No government in the world would sit by and allow its citizens to be subjected to this kind of indiscriminate bombardment. The loss of innocent life is a terrible tragedy, and the blame for that tragedy lies with Hamas."

Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida, the ranking Republican on the House committee, also expressed support for the Israeli offensive.

"The most recent onslaught of rockets against Israel from Hamas represents a serious escalation in their war against Israel," she said in statement Monday. She said the Israeli response "has been carefully calibrated to halt the rocket fire, aimed at surgically eliminating Hamas militants and the teams that are operating the rockets, while at the same time making every effort to limit civilian casualties in the face of Hamas' callous use of innocent Palestinians as human shields."

But a dissenting view came from Rep. Dennis J. Kucinich, D-Ohio, who called on the United Nations to launch an independent inquiry into the Gaza situation.

"Israel is leveling Gaza to strike at Hamas, just as they pulverized south Lebanon to strike at Hezbollah," Kucinich said. "Yet in both cases civilian populations were attacked, countless innocents killed or injured, infrastructure targeted and destroyed, and civil law enforcement negated. All this was, and is, disproportionate, indiscriminate mass violence in violation of international law. Israel is not exempt from international law and must be held accountable. It is time for the UN to not just call for a cease-fire, but for an inquiry as to Israel's actions."

The Palestinian death toll from the Israeli air strikes has reached 300 so far, and Israeli officials said they were expecting a lengthy campaign to destroy Hamas' military capacity. Israel has called up 6,500 reservists for a possible ground assault on the Gaza Strip.

So far, Hamas rockets have killed two Israelis and wounded scores of others.

White House Response

The White House on Monday also took Israel's side in the fighting, demanding that Hamas halt its rocket fire into Israel and agree to a last ceasefire.

"In order for the violence to stop, Hamas must stop firing rockets into Israel and agree to respect a sustainable and durable ceasefire," White House spokesman Gordon Johndroe said. "That is the objective to which all parties need to be working. That is what the United States is working towards."

Johndroe said President Bush was briefed by his national security team on the latest developments in the Middle East.

President-elect Barack Obama, vacationing in Hawaii, has not commented directly on the new outbreak of violence. His senior adviser, David Axelrod, said Sunday on CBS' "Face the Nation" that Obama "recognizes the special relationship between United States and Israel" and "wants to be a constructive force in helping to bring about the peace and security that both the Israelis and the Palestinians want and deserve."

Axelrod acknowledged that "obviously, this situation has become even more complicated in the last couple of days and weeks."

Obama, he said, spoke with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice over the weekend and is receiving briefings on the events unfolding in the Middle East. "He's monitoring the situation closely. But the Bush administration has to speak for America now," Axelrod said.

At a briefing in Crawford, Texas, Monday, Johndroe said the United States was working through Egypt and other countries in the Middle East to try to convince Hamas to halt its rocket fire into Israel and to accept a "sustainable and durable ceasefire." He said President Bush had spoken to Jordanian King Abdullah on Monday and to Saudi King Abdullah on Dec. 27.

But he said that for now, the Bush administration was not making any efforts to restrain Israeli military action, other than to avoid civilian casualties.

"At this point, the United States understands that Israel needs to take action to defend itself," Johndroe said.

He said Hamas has an opportunity to join the Middle East peace process by recognizing Israel, rejecting violence and agreeing to abide by previous agreements between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

"Hamas has a choice to make," Johndroe said. "Right now, it has chosen to be a terrorist organization that fires rockets into Israel."

Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni said the goal of the Israeli operation was to alter the situation on the ground and restore Israel's deterrent capacity against Hamas.

"We are trying to change realities on the ground," she told CBS's "Early Show." "Hamas needs to understand that the equation is going to be changed. And then, I hope, we can stop and live in quiet in this region and give some peace to our citizens."

The perception of Israel's deterrent power suffered after its August 2006 war against Hezbollah militants in Lebanon. Despite 34 days of heavy air attacks, Hizbollah survived the Israeli onslaught and emerged as the victor of that conflict among many in the Arab world.