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03.03.21

US firmly opposed to ICC investigations hiding five years of Gaza rocket attacks

03.03.21

U.S. says firmly opposed to ICC probe of alleged Israeli war crimes

State Department says U.S. 'will continue to uphold strong commitment to Israel and its security, including by opposing actions that seek to target Israel unfairly,' holds view that ICC 'has no jurisdiction over this matter'

Itamar Eichner, News Agencies | Published: 03.03.21 , 23:23

The United States firmly opposes the announcement by the International Criminal Court prosecutor that her office will formally investigate war crimes in the Palestinian Territories, U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"We will continue to uphold our strong commitment to Israel and its security, including by opposing actions that seek to target Israel unfairly, the ICC ... has no jurisdiction over this matter," Price told a regular news briefing, referring to the prosecutor's announcement earlier Wednesday.

The outgoing ICC chief prosecutor Fatou Bensouda said that her office will open a formal investigation into war crimes in the West Bank and Gaza Strip during a period beginning June 13, 2014, just three weeks before the start of the 2014 Gaza war between Hamas and Israel.

"The decision to open an investigation followed a painstaking preliminary examination undertaken by my office that lasted close to five years," said Bensouda, who leaves office in June, in a statement published on the ICC website.

She said the probe would be conducted "independently, impartially and objectively, without fear or favor."

Israeli officials requested the assistance of the U.S. administration in recent weeks in anticipation of the ICC decision.

The matter was raised in discussions between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and U.S. President Joe Biden in February and in Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi's discussions with his American counterpart.

Biden has yet to lift the sanctions on Bensouda and her court associates imposed by predecessor Donald Trump in June 2020 over plans to investigate Israeli and American military actions.

Israeli officials have previously accused the court of overstepping its bounds, saying Israel has been unfairly singled out. They reject the allegations, saying military actions in Gaza were acts of self-defense and the status of the West Bank is disputed and must be resolved through negotiations.

While the court would have a hard time prosecuting Israelis, it could issue arrest warrants that would make it difficult for Israeli officials to travel abroad.

The Palestinian Authority welcomed the ICC decision on Wednesday.

The PA Foreign Ministry called it "a long-awaited step that serves Palestine's tireless pursuit of justice and accountability, which are indispensable pillars of the peace the Palestinian people seek and deserve."

Hamas also welcomed the initiation of the investigation and called on Bensouda to "resist any pressure" that could scuttle the process.

The prosecutor has said in the past that any investigation should include the terror group for its indiscriminate rocket attacks on Israeli territory.

Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem said that the terror group, which has ruled Gaza since a bloody 2007 takeover, "is totally certain that its resistance of the occupation is legitimate" under international law.

03.03.21

Hamas pushing ICC probe to resist any pressure to scuttle war crimes investigation

03.03.21

PA welcomes 'long awaited' ICC war crimes probe

Palestinian Authority, which had been pushing for investigation for years, says decision 'serves Palestine's tireless pursuit of justice and accountability'; Hamas urges Bensouda to 'resist any pressure,' says group 'totally certain' its own actions are legal  
Ynet, News Agencies | Published: 03.03.21 , 16:46

The Palestinian Authority on Wednesday welcomed the decision by the International Criminal Court's chief prosecutor to investigate potential war crimes in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem.

It is "a long-awaited step that serves Palestine's tireless pursuit of justice and accountability, which are indispensable pillars of the peace the Palestinian people seek and deserve," the PA Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

Hamas also welcomed the initiation of the investigation and called on Bensouda to "resist any pressure" that could scuttle the process. Bensouda has said in the past that any investigation should include the terror group for its indiscriminate rocket attacks on Israeli territory.

"This is a step forward to implement justice, punish the occupation and do justice to the Palestinian people," said Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem.

Asked whether the investigation can also cover rocket attacks by his group, Qassem said that Hamas "is totally certain that its resistance of the occupation is legitimate" under international law.

The ICC announcement comes after the court ruled on Feb. 5 that it has jurisdiction in the case, a move which prompted swift rejection from Washington and Jerusalem. The Palestinian Authority welcomed the ruling.

"The decision to open an investigation followed a painstaking preliminary examination undertaken by my office that lasted close to five years," Chief Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda said in a statement.

"In the end, our central concern must be for the victims of crimes, both Palestinian and Israeli, arising from the long cycle of violence and insecurity that has caused deep suffering and despair on all sides," Bensouda said.

"My office will take the same principled, non-partisan, approach that it has adopted in all situations over which its jurisdiction is seized," she said.

Bensouda, who will be replaced by British prosecutor Karim Khan on June 16, said in December 2019 that "war crimes have been or are being committed in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip". She named both the Israel Defense Forces and Palestinian terror groups such as Hamas as possible perpetrators.

The next step will be to determine whether Israel or Palestinian authorities have investigations themselves and to assess those.

There was no immediate comment from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. When the court ruled on jurisdiction, he said: "When the ICC investigates Israel for fake war crimes, this is pure anti-Semitism."

03.03.21

PA critics seek vaccine & see officials neglecting nation while enjoying perks

03.03.21

Palestinian Authority faces criticism over vaccine rollout

Human rights' groups call on the Palestinian government to explain the criteria used for distributing the vaccines, which so far have been given to senior PLO staff, security members and even soccer players instead of health professionals

Associated Press | Published: 03.03.21 , 15:02

The Palestinian Authority's decision to divert some of its tiny stockpile of coronavirus vaccines to senior officials, soccer players and others has sparked controversy, feeding into long-standing concerns about corruption as it struggles to respond to a worsening outbreak.

The PA has repeatedly said that its first vaccines would go to medical workers and elderly patients, who are at greatest risk of severe illness or death. But to date it has only acquired enough doses to inoculate 6,000 people in a population of nearly 5 million.

“We have focused from the beginning on health workers, but there are around 100,000” in the West Bank and Gaza, Health Minister Mai Alkaila told reporters on Tuesday. “It’s not enough.”

The Health Ministry says it has secured tens of thousands more doses through a World Health Organization program designed to aid poor countries and through agreements with pharmaceutical companies, but they have yet to materialize following weeks of delays. Israel, which has faced international criticism for not sharing its vast stockpile with Palestinians living in territories it has controlled for more than a half-century, has given the PA 2,000 doses of the Moderna vaccine. The PA acquired another 10,000 doses of the Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine. Both are given in two doses.

Under the terms of the Oslo Accords, Ramallah is responsible for the healthcare of its own population and has repeatedly said it is obtaining its own vaccines.

The Independent Commission for Human Rights and Aman, another Palestinian group that promotes transparency, have each issued statements calling on the Palestinian government to explain the criteria used for distributing the vaccines.

The ICHR said it had documented cases in which the vaccine was distributed “based on mediation and personal relationships, without a justified medical priority,” as well as cases in which officials had helped their relatives to obtain the vaccine without medical justification.

Alkaila said 2,000 doses have been shipped to Gaza, which is ruled by the Palestinian militant group Hamas and is under an Israeli-Egyptian blockade. She said another 200 doses have been sent to the royal court in neighboring Jordan, without providing details. Of the remaining 9,800 doses, she said 90% have been given to health workers. The remainder went to security forces who guard President Mahmoud Abbas — who is 85 —

and Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh. They also went to senior members of the Palestine Liberation Organization who are over age 65, as well as civil servants preparing for elections planned for later this year.

Alkaila said vaccines were also given to members of the national soccer team to allow them to represent the Palestinians in international matches, and to students who require certificates of vaccination to study abroad.

She acknowledged that authorities had erred by giving the vaccines to at least two journalists in Bethlehem but said they had acted contrary to regulations and were admonished for it.

The Palestinian Authority was established in the 1990s as part of agreements with Israel to administer parts of the West Bank and Gaza, territories Israel captured in the 1967 war that the Palestinians want for their future state. Under those agreements, the PA is responsible for health care in the areas it administers, but both sides are to cooperate in combatting epidemics.

As the Palestinians' hopes for independence have faded over the last two decades, the PA has become less popular and more authoritarian — with senior officials widely seen as neglecting the national cause while enjoying the perks of cooperation with Israel. Abbas' mandate expired more than a decade ago, and general elections have not been held in 15 years.

The Palestinians have reported nearly 190,000 cases and at least 2,063 deaths since the pandemic began, and the PA imposed new restrictions this week in response to the rising number of cases.

03.03.21

Vehicle cargo ship that suffered four holes from attack has left Strait of Hormuz

03.03.21

Israeli-owned cargo ship back at sea after suspected Iran attack

Satellite-tracking data shows Bahamian-flagged MV Helios Ray was sailing along the Omani coast toward the Arabian Sea, days after a mysterious blast punched 2 holes in the vessel's port side and 2 on its starboard side

Associated Press| Published: 03.03.21 , 08:30

An Israeli-owned cargo ship that suffered a mysterious explosion last week has left Dubai's port and was transiting the Gulf of Oman on Wednesday, satellite tracking data showed. The suspected attack has raised tensions in the region.

The giant MV Helios Ray, a Bahamian-flagged roll-on, roll-off vehicle cargo ship, was sailing along the Omani coast toward the Arabian Sea, according to satellite-tracking data from website MarineTraffic.com, days after docking in Dubai for repairs.

Overnight, the vessel passed through the strategic Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf through which a third of all oil traded by sea flows. Its destination remained unclear.

Last week, a blast struck the cargo ship in the same waterway, raising alarms about ship security in the Mideast. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused Israel's regional foe Iran of attacking the ship. Iran swiftly denied the charge.

Tensions between Iran and the West have escalated in recent weeks as Iran accelerates its nuclear program, seeking to pressure the United States to grant sanctions relief it received under its tattered 2015 nuclear deal with world powers.

In the current standoff, each side is insisting the other move first to return to the deal, which former President Donald Trump abandoned nearly three years ago.

It remains unclear what caused the explosion, which reportedly punched two holes in the vessel's port side and two on its starboard side, just above the waterline. The incident recalled the summer of 2019, when the U.S. military blamed Iran for a series of suspected attacks on oil tankers in the Persian Gulf.

The Navy had alleged that Iran used limpet mines - designed to be attached magnetically to a ship's hull - to strike some of the vessels. Iran denied any role in the suspected assaults.

03.02.21

FM's Ashkenazi & Safadi in third meeting at Allenby Crossing; US will be informed

03.02.21

Israel, U.S. reach behind-the-scenes agreement on Iran, FM says

Top diplomat notes good relations with Biden administration, says both nations would discuss return to nuclear deal that would prevent Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons

Itamar Eichner | Published: 03.02.21 , 18:52

Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi said on Tuesday that Israel and the United States have agreed that neither nation will make decisions pertaining to Iran and the Iran nuclear deal without informing the other first.

"If anyone thought the Americans would run to make an agreement with Iran - it did not happen up until now, and I hope it will not happen going forward," Ashkenazi said in a Zoom call with Israeli representatives to East Asia and the Pacific, stressing that relations with the Biden administration were good and that he has been in close contact with his U.S. counterpart, Anthony Blinken.

"There is a decision by a small forum constituting of the prime minister, the defense minister, foreign minister and the heads of the defense establishment to enter a dialogue with them in a non-oppositional manner, discuss Israeli interests and how to forge a great agreement that will safeguard Israeli and regional interests and prevent a nuclear Iran.

Our policy is to exhaust this dialogue in person and to professionally converse with the Americans as allies."

Israel's top diplomat also spoke about Iranian threats on Israeli foreign missions after a suspected Iranian attack near the Israeli Embassy in New Delhi, India, and said that the state was doing its best to ensure the well-being of its representatives abroad.

He also added that he expected Israel to establish relations with more Arab countries in 2021 after normalizing ties with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco the previous year, saying "it's not a question of if, but under which condition."

Ashkenazi also said that one of his ministry's goals was to improve relations with neighboring Jordan and Egypt, and to expand cooperation with them at the business level as well.

Earlier on Tuesday, Ashkenazi met with his Jordanian counterpart, Ayman Safadi, at the Allenby Border Crossing between the West Bank and Jordan.

The two discussed promoting cooperation between the two nations and economic and civil issues involving the Palestinians, read a statement from Ashkenazi's office.

This was the third such meeting between the ministers at Allenby Crossing.

03.02.21

Gantz considers UAE tourism and commerce security as PA statehood sidelined

03.02.21

Defense chief sees 'special security arrangement' with Gulf allies

Gantz says Jerusalem was pursuing security ties with Gulf Arab countries who share common concern about Iranian threat, downplaying reports of a potential defense pact  
Reuters | Published: 03.02.21 , 17:15

Defense Minister Benny Gantz said on Tuesday Israel intends to develop a "special security arrangement" with Gulf Arab allies, who share common concerns over Iran.

The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain established formal relations with Israel last year. As part of their U.S.-backed rapprochement, Israel and the UAE have proposed defense and military cooperation.

In a visit to an Israel-Gaza border crossing, Gantz played down a report by public radio Kan that Israel was considering a defense agreement with Gulf Arab countries, but said security ties would be pursued.

"I don't think it's going to be a defense pact but we are going to develop defense relations with every country that we have relations with," Gantz told Reuters.

"We have this process of setting up (a) special security arrangement, and within this arrangement, we can continue and develop our relations," he said.

Gantz declined to go into details on what such an arrangement would entail.

Gantz further signaled that Israel had no opposition to the sale of 50 Lockheed Martin's F-35 stealth jets to the UAE in a deal approved during former U.S. President Donald Trump's last days in office.

The deal is now under review by U.S. President Joe Biden's administration.

Asked about Israel's view of the sale, Gantz said Israel's "qualitative military edge" must be preserved by the United States, adding that the advanced warplane was already in the country's arsenal.

On Monday, the UAE's ambassador to Israel took up his post, pledging to build up new bilateral relations. Israel opened an embassy in Abu Dhabi in January.

Their so-called U.S.-brokered "Abraham Accords", joined by Bahrain, have uncorked tourism and commerce between Israel and Gulf Arab countries. Palestinians have been critical of the rapprochement, worried that their own unmet statehood goal might be sidelined.

03.02.21

400+ EU diplomats & staff signed letter to Josep Borrell against Israel annexation

03.02.21

European lawmakers urge action against Israel's 'de-facto annexation' of West Bank

Letter signed by 400 European politicians says Biden administration 'presents a chance to correct course' in Middle East diplomacy, calls on multi-national cooperation to 'prevent unilateral action undermining possibility of peace'

AFP | Published: 03.02.21 , 12:31

More than 400 European parliamentarians have urged leaders to use Joe Biden's new presidency as an opportunity to stop what they term Israel's "de-facto annexation" of the West Bank.

A letter seen by AFP was signed by 400 European politicians from across a range of backgrounds who serve in national legislatures and senates or in the European parliament.

Addressed to European foreign ministers and EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, the letter argues that "the Biden administration presents a chance to correct course" in Middle East diplomacy.

"The previous U.S. administration left the conflict farther away from peace than ever," it added.

Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's "undivided capital" and moved Washington's embassy there, infuriating the Palestinians who claim the eastern part of the city as the capital of their future state.

The State Department under Trump also said it no longer viewed Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank as illegal.



Trump's widely criticized Middle East peace plan ear-marked parts of the West Bank for Israeli annexation.

'Possibility of peace'

While the **Trump plan is dead**, settlement **expansion continues**, with Israel regularly approving the construction of **new homes for Jews on Palestinian territory**.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a close Trump ally, agreed to **pause West Bank annexation** plans in **exchange for** the diplomatic **normalization** with the United Arab Emirates.

"**However**, developments on the ground clearly point to a **reality of rapidly progressing de facto annexation**, especially through accelerated settlement expansion and demolitions of Palestinian structures," said the letter.

"**Europe must** work with the Biden administration, countries in the region and the parties on the ground to **prevent** unilateral action undermining the **possibility of peace**, advance the rights and security of all people **under Israel's effective control**."

Israel gained **control of the West Bank in the 1967** Six-Day War, during which it also seized control of east Jerusalem, an area it later annexed.

The European Union insists any viable Israeli-Palestinian peace **deal must be based on** Israel's pre-**1967** borders -- a condition rejected across much of the Israeli political spectrum.

**Biden** has **indicated** his administration will restore U.S. **opposition to West Bank settlements** expansion, but he **does not intend to move** the U.S. **embassy** back to Tel Aviv.

The letter also said that **Gaza**, the jointly Egyptian and Israeli-blockaded Mediterranean enclave, "**remains at risk of violent escalation** at any moment", blaming both the **blockade** and "intra-Palestinian **divisions**".

**Hamas** Islamists who have **controlled Gaza since 2007** are long-standing **rivals of Fatah** secularists who dominate the Palestinian Authority, but the two sides are engaged in a unity push ahead of Palestinian elections called for later this year.

"**Palestinian** reconciliation and **elections** across all the Palestinian territory **is vital**, including as a **basis for ending the isolation of Gaza**," the letter said.

03.03.21

Rockets from central Iraq attack Baghdad airbase; Pope due to visit March 5-8

03.03.21

10 rockets land at Iraqi airbase hosting U.S. forces

**Attack** on military base, the **second within a month**, comes just **days before Pope Francis's visit in Iraq on Friday** and a week after U.S. carried out retaliatory airstrike in eastern Syria that killed one fighter in an Iranian-backed militia

Reuters| Published: **03.03.21** , 11:46

At least 10 rockets landed on Wednesday at Iraq's Ain al-Asad airbase that hosts U.S., coalition and Iraqi forces, the Iraqi military said.

It was the second rocket attack in Iraq this month and came two days before Pope Francis is due to visit the country. The Pope will visit Iraq from March 5-8 despite deteriorating security in some parts of the country.

The attack caused no significant losses, Iraq's military said without going into further detail.

A Baghdad Operations Command official said earlier that about 13 rockets were launched from a location about 8 km (5 miles) from the base, which is in western Anbar province.

Another Iraqi security source and a government official who spoke on condition of anonymity said the rockets were launched from the Baiader area, west of Baghdad city. On Feb. 16 a rocket attack on U.S.-led forces in northern Iraq killed a civilian contractor and injured a U.S. service member.

U.S. Army Colonel Wayne Marotto, spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition, said on Twitter that the rockets targeted the base at 7:30am Iraq time on Wednesday.

The Pentagon said Monday that a retaliatory U.S. airstrike last week in eastern Syria killed one fighter in an Iranian-backed militia and wounded two others.

"What I can tell you is that we believe right now there was likely one militia member killed, and two militia members wounded," Pentagon press secretary John Kirby told reporters.