

PM in Gaza on solidarity trip

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By Agencies

Prime Minister Najib Razak pledged solidarity with the Palestinians on his first trip to Gaza today, and backed reconciliation efforts between Hamas and Fatah.

Najib, who entered via the Rafah crossing from Egypt along with his Foreign Minister Anifah Aman and other officials as well as former PAS deputy president Nasharuddin Mat Isa, was met by Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniya.

Najib, who is also accompanied by his wife Rosmah Mansor, is the first Malaysian prime minister to set foot on Palestine soil.

Speaking at a joint press conference in Rafah shortly after his arrival, Najib said his visit was intended "to show solidarity and our support for the struggle of the Palestinian people."

"We may come from thousands of miles away ... but we are one Umma (Muslim nation) and we believe in the struggle of the Palestinian people," he said.

Najib also expressed support for renewed reconciliation efforts by Hamas and the rival Palestinian Fatah movement, including attempts to form a consensus government to pave the way for new elections.

"We believe in this unity government and we pray to Allah that the talks will be successful and a united government will become a reality in the near future," Najib said.

Haniya used the conference to make reference to Israeli legislative elections underway on Tuesday, warning that "the trend of the Israeli elections suggests a move from an extremist government to a more extreme government."

"This requires us as Palestinians, and Arabs, and Muslims, to build a unified strategy to confront rising Zionist extremism."

After the press conference, Najib was to visit Gaza City's Shifa hospital and the parliament building. His delegation was expected to deliver medical supplies.

Staunch supporter

Mainly Muslim Malaysia, a long-standing staunch supporter of the Palestinians' aspirations to statehood, does not have diplomatic ties with Israel.

During last November's conflict between Israel and Gaza militants, Najib urged international powers to influence the Jewish state to halt what he called its military aggression against

the Palestinians.

A ceasefire between Israel and Hamas ended the November 14-21 fighting that left 177 Palestinians dead - including about 100 civilians - as well as six Israelis - four civilians and two soldiers.

Najib's visit is the latest in a string of high-profile trips to Gaza, following the landmark trip last October by Qatar's Emir Sheikh Hamid bin Khalifa al-Thani, who became the first head of state to come to the territory since Hamas took control in 2007.

During the November conflict, a delegation of Arab foreign ministers, along with Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davatoglu, visited Gaza on a solidarity mission.

And on Feb 9, Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki is scheduled to make his first trip to the coastal strip, according to Hamas officials.

The visits have been made possible in part by Egypt's decision to loosen some of the restrictions on travel through its Rafah border crossing with Gaza.

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