

Israel working out details of flotilla raid probe
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Israel was working out details on Wednesday of a limited internal investigation into its deadly raid on a Gaza-bound flotilla and reportedly was considering easing its blockade of the territory.

The Forum of Seven senior ministers met behind closed doors to discuss the mandate of the proposed investigating committee in the face of world calls for a far wider probe of the May 31 raid in which nine Turkish activists were killed in international waters off Israel's coast.

Media reported that the ministers would present their decisions to the US administration, whose backing is considered essential to help deflect harsh criticism of Israel.

The mass-selling Yediot Aharonot said the ministers would have to decide on a different format should Washington deem that their proposal fails to meet the UN Security Council's call for an impartial investigation "conforming to international standards."

"We understand that the international participation in investigating these matters will be important to the credibility everybody wants to see," US State Department spokesman Philip Crowley said on Tuesday.

"We're in conversation with (the) Israelis and others about how to best accomplish this," he added.

The plan in its current form entails a panel of Israeli jurists, joined by two observers, one an American and the other from a European country, media said.

The Haaretz daily said the panel would lack investigatory powers such as the right to issue subpoenas, and that its recommendations would not be binding.

Defence Minister Ehud Barak has made it clear the special forces involved in the raid on the six-ship flotilla will not be questioned.

The committee may hear testimony from ministers but will not be able to investigate on its own, Haaretz said.

The raid on the ships seeking to break Gaza's blockade plunged Israel into a diplomatic crisis and led Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to abruptly cut short a visit to Canada and postpone a trip to Washington.

He now plans to meet US President Barack Obama later this month, following a visit by Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, who was expected at the White House later on Wednesday.

The talks come as the deadly raid turned the spotlight on the blockade which Israel imposed on Gaza in 2006 after the capture of one of its soldiers and tightened the following year when the Islamist Hamas movement seized power.

Britain's Daily Telegraph reported that Israel is set to accept a plan under which it would ease the blockade in return for the international community agreeing to a limited probe into the raid.

The seven ministers reportedly discussed a possible easing of the blockade while officials in Washington said Obama would discuss with Abbas specific projects to relieve the plight of the people of Gaza.

International opposition to the blockade has gained momentum in recent days.

Spain, which currently holds the rotating EU presidency, has said it will soon unveil a proposal for the lifting of the blockade, while France has suggested the European Union inspect the cargoes of ships heading to Gaza as well as maintain a presence at the Rafah border crossing with Egypt.

Hamas said on Tuesday that it is not opposed to the idea of EU inspections provided there is no interference by Israel.

The closure of the Gaza Strip prevents all but basic goods from entering the territory and severely limits the ability of Palestinians to travel in and out.

Israel says the blockade is necessary to contain Hamas, which is sworn to the destruction of the Jewish state, and to prevent the smuggling of weapons. Critics slam it as "collective punishment" of Gaza's 1.5 million residents.

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