

Gaza flotilla: Excerpts from press conference with DM Barak, CoS Ashkenazi and Naval Commander Marom

31 May 2010

A press conference was held Monday (May 31) following IDF actions Sunday evening with regards to the provocation aid flotilla to the Gaza Strip. The press conference included remarks by Minister of Defense Ehud Barak, Chief of the General Staff Lt. Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi and Israeli Naval Commander Maj. Eliezer Marom.

“Tonight the IDF gained control over the flotilla which tried to enter the Gaza beaches and break the blockade. The cabinet, the Prime Minister and I instructed the IDF to take action. On one of the six ships, the protesters initiated violence. We express remorse for the injured activists, however, the full responsibility rests on the organizers of the flotilla and those participants who acted violently,” said the Minister of Defense

Barak added that “Israel appealed to the flotilla organizers prior to it sailing and also upon its approach to Gaza, in warning and inviting the flotilla to arrive to the Ashdod harbor, and offering to transfer the aid cargo to Gaza after having it undergo security examinations. All of these appeals - prior to the flotilla setting sail and afterwards - were refused. Upon boarding one of the ships, IDF soldiers were attacked by protesters and as a result some were seriously injured. According to initial reports, ten protesters were killed and others were injured. In addition, Naval soldiers were injured, some from gunshots others from bladed weaponry and clubs. All the injured protesters along with IDF soldiers were evacuated to hospitals in Israel. We are currently assessing this ongoing situation.”

The flotilla is a political provocation intended for the media

“In Gaza there is no starvation and no humanitarian crisis. The area is governed by Hamas, a terror organization which constantly grows stronger with weapons and rockets - in order to harm Israel. Hamas is holding an Israeli soldier captive with disregard for international diplomacy. Therefore Israel has the natural right to check anything entering Gaza. The flotilla is a political provocation intended for the media influenced by anti-Israel organizations. The IHH, which stands behind the flotilla, is a terror organization.”

Barak continued: “Whatever disagreements may be, Israel will continue to act swiftly in order to protect its sovereignty, security, and rights to defend its citizens, in any place and any time, using any means necessary. The responsibility for the situation in the Gaza Strip rests on the terrorist rule of Hamas. Releasing Gilad Shalit and ceasing terrorism are conditions for any change is the leading reality. Israel reaches out her hand for peace.”

There was radical violence from the moment we arrived

Chief of the General Staff, Lt. Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi said, “The actions took place in order to prevent unsupervised infiltration of people or cargo into the Gaza Strip. After all of our appeals during the night to the organizers of the flotilla failed, the Naval Corps was prepared for a takeover according to orders, in order to prevent the flotilla’s arrival.

What occurred on the Marmara ship under possession of the extremist IHH organization, is not what took place in the five other ships in the flotilla. From what I saw during the night, there was no connection to a campaign or demonstration of peaceful workers or of humanitarian aid. It was extreme violence from the first moment our soldiers boarded the

ship, with prior preparation to attack the soldiers with metal and wooden poles, and knives. At a certain point they began using live fire, and part of the time this was done with weapons stolen from the soldiers.”

“Beyond any doubt it is clear to me that this violence obligated our soldiers to use their weapons, as human lives were in danger. The soldiers acted in the way that the situation demanded. As a result of this action we know of around ten casualties. We are working to evacuate their bodies and identify them. There are also a number of injuries. The naval soldiers also suffered a number of injuries, which were evacuated like the rest of the injured people. Some of the soldiers were wounded seriously, some by stabbing and by fire. Our forces acted with sensitivity on one hand and with determination on the other.”

“A force was organized for this mission and prepared for a protest, but the riot dispersal equipment was insufficient and from the moment their lives were in danger, they used their weapons. The ships are making their way to the Ashdod harbor and we will oversee the evacuation of people and cargo, and will check what we will then transfer to Gaza. This incident is almost over and we are assessing this continuing situation, including what is going on in the other locations, and we will be prepared in those locations as well. Unfortunately, it is clear to us that those on the ship chose to use confrontation in a difficult manner, and to use extreme violence, which brought about these results. We will complete our investigations and if we learn additional details, we will share them with the public.”

The soldiers used live fire in defense

Naval Commander Maj. Eliezer Marom explained: “The Naval Corps was given a mission to stop the flotilla to Gaza. We prepared our forces in an organized manner, mentally, physically and operationally. In the weeks leading up to the flotilla, we warned the organizers. Last night, when they refused to change their port of destination to Ashdod and to let us transfer the humanitarian equipment, and decided to sail towards Gaza in order to break the maritime blockade, we departed to the water in order to carry out the mission, while warning the ships that they would not be able to enter Gaza, which is closed off.

“We conveyed very clear messages to the ships, which were rejected with inappropriate behavior. Aboard the Marmara ship were about 600 activists who attacked IDF soldiers with firepower and other weapons, with unconventional violence. Once an imminent danger to life was seen, in order to defend themselves the soldiers had to operate their weapons, and in order to prevent the people from attacking, they tried to use riot dispersal means which they had been equipped with in order to prevent the passengers from harming them. After this was unsuccessful, and the soldiers’ lives were in danger, they had to use live ammunition to defend themselves.

“The fighters demonstrated determination and courage and exhibited much restraint, and the result of casualties in the incident could have been much worse if the soldiers acted differently. In terms of injuries to our forces: one soldier sustained a severe head wound, two soldiers were injured by live fire, and one was stabbed with a knife. In all of the five other ships we did not use live fire and we succeeded in stopping and intercepting the ships.”