

Inside Hamas tight grip on Gaza

Hamas is now collecting taxes from the private sector. They include fees levied on Gaza merchants bringing in smuggled goods, such as cigarettes, batteries, solar panels and phones.

BY REUTERS

Hamas' continuing influence over key Gaza power structures has fuelled widespread scepticism about the prospects of US President Donald Trump's peace plan, which requires the militant group to give up its weapons in exchange for an Israeli military withdrawal from the territory.

Trump's international Board of Peace, which is meant to supervise Gaza's transitional governance, held its inaugural meeting in Washington on Thursday.

Details of the meeting was not available by press time.

"Hamas is advancing steps on the ground meant to preserve its influence and grip in the Gaza Strip from the bottom up by means of integrating its supporters in government offices, security apparatuses and local authorities," the military said in a document presented to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in late January.

Hamas says it is ready to hand over administration of the enclave to a US-backed committee of Palestinian technocrats headed by Ali Shaath, a former Palestinian Authority official in the occupied West Bank. But it says Israel has not yet allowed committee members to enter Gaza to assume their responsibilities.

Netanyahu did not respond to *Reuters'* questions about Hamas' control over Gaza. An Israeli government official, speaking on condition of anonymity, dismissed any notion of a future role for the group as "twisted fantasy", saying, "Hamas is finished as a governing authority

in the Gaza Strip."

The Israeli military declined to comment on Hamas' assertions.

Israeli military officials say Hamas, which refuses to disarm, has been taking advantage of an October ceasefire to reassert control in areas vacated by Israeli troops. Israel still holds more than half of Gaza, but nearly all its 2 million people are in Hamas-held areas.

Reuters could not determine the full scope of Hamas' appointments and attempts to replenish its coffers.

New governors

Hamas has named five district governors, all of them with links to its armed al-Qassam Brigades, according to two Palestinian sources with direct knowledge of its operations. It has also replaced senior officials in Gaza's economy and interior ministries, which manage taxation and security, the sources said. The US State Department and Shaath's National Committee for the Administration of Gaza (NCAG) did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

A source close to the 15-member NCAG said it was aware of Hamas' actions and was not happy about them.

Last Saturday, the committee issued a statement urging international mediators to step up efforts to resolve outstanding issues, saying it would not be able to carry out its responsibilities "without the full administrative, civilian, and police powers necessary to implement its mandate effectively".

Trump's Board of Peace holds first meeting

The appointment of Shaath's committee in January marked the start of the next phase of Trump's plan to end the war in Gaza, even as key elements of the first phase - including a complete cessation of hostilities between Israel and Hamas - remain unfulfilled.

The Board of Peace was expected to receive reports on the committee's work

PAYING SALARIES

Hamas has continued to pay salaries to public servants and fighters, which average around 1,500 shekels, around \$500 (Shs-1.7m) a month, according to at least four Hamas sources.

"Every moment of delay in allowing the technocratic committee to enter the Gaza Strip leads to the imposition of a *de facto* reality," said Reham Owda, a Palestinian political analyst. "[These] has increased the administrative and security control of the Hamas government in Gaza."

yesterday.

Trump is also expected to announce countries that will commit personnel for a UN-authorised stabilisation force and help train a new Palestinian police force, which the NCAG is expected to manage.

Hamas is looking to incorporate 10,000 of its police officers in the new force, *Reuters* reported in January. They include hundreds of members of its powerful internal security service, which has merged with the police, two sources in Gaza said.

Hamas did not immediately respond to a request for comment on this assertion.

Asked whether Israel would raise concerns about Hamas' entrenchment in Gaza at the Thursday's meeting, Netanyahu's office did not comment.

Israel has said repeatedly it opposes any role for Hamas in Gaza after it attacked southern Israel in October 2023, killing more than 1,200 people, according to Israeli tallies. Israel's air and ground assault on the enclave has killed more than 72,000 people, according to the Palestinian health ministry.

One of the stated goals of this campaign was "dismantling Hamas governing capabilities" in Gaza. The group seized control of the territory in a brief civil war with its political rival, Fatah, in 2007. Since then, appointments to government ministries and municipal offices there have been decided by Hamas' political wing. It also set up its own civil service, which employs thousands of people.

At least 14 of Gaza's 17 ministries are now operating, compared with five at the height of the war, according to the Israeli military document. At least 13 of its 25 municipalities have also resumed operations, it says.

Hamas' Al-Thawabta, the spokesperson for the Hamas-run Gaza Government Media Office, said "this relative recovery" was not a product of "political considerations".

"The organisational measures taken during the past period were necessary

to prevent the collapse of the service system and do not conflict with any future arrangements agreed upon," he said in a statement to *Reuters*.

According to the two sources, Hamas appointed the five governors along with four mayors to replace people killed or dismissed during the war. The selection of people with ties to its armed wing for the governors' roles was to crack down on armed gangs, they said, adding some had received weapons and financing from Israel.

Netanyahu acknowledged Israeli backing for anti-Hamas clans in June, though Israel has provided few details.

Taxes on smuggled cigarettes, phones

Since a violent campaign against its opponents in the first weeks of the truce, Hamas has focused on maintaining public order and collecting taxes in its side of the "yellow line" agreed to demarcate Israeli- and Hamas-controlled areas, according to Israeli military officials and Gaza sources.

"There is no Opposition to Hamas within the yellow line now, and it is taking over all economic aspects of daily life," an Israeli military official told *Reuters*.

Mr Mustafa Ibrahim, a political commentator in Gaza, said looting and robbery had stopped.

"Hamas is trying to organise markets and streets through the traffic police," Ibrahim said. "Police stations have reopened... The tax department and economy ministry are working and collecting."

Hamas collects taxes mainly from the private sector; the Israeli military document says. They include fees levied on Gaza merchants bringing in smuggled goods, such as cigarettes, batteries, solar panels and mobile phones, according to three other sources, including a merchant. Hamas has earned hundreds of millions of shekels by taxing smuggled cigarettes since the war began, according to an Israeli indictment filed this month.

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