

Fatah, Hamas miss unity deadline set by Cairo

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Palestinian President
Mahmoud Abbas

Hamas Islamists and the rival Fatah movement of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas have been given three more weeks to seek a reconciliation deal after it became clear they would miss a July 7 deadline set by Egypt

Palestinian officials said on Tuesday that Cairo had now given the factions until July 28 to agree to resolve their political divisions and end bickering marked by clashes and security crackdowns in Gaza and the West Bank.

The sides will leave Egypt and return for a final negotiating round on July 25.

"It was decided to give the two sides an additional chance and time to make progress on the ground, especially on the issue of political detainees, and make a real breakthrough that would help achieve national reconciliation," Hamas official Ezzat el-Rishiq, who is in Cairo, told Reuters.

Arrests and counter arrests by forces loyal to the two groups have hampered efforts to restore political unity and boost prospects for a resumption of peace-making with Israel.

Rishiq said if the two factions met the new deadline, leaders of all Palestinian groups would be invited by Cairo to sign a reconciliation deal at a ceremony on July 28.

A deal would aim to gradually end divisions by setting up a joint committee to handle the reconstruction of Gaza, largely destroyed in an Israeli offensive in December.

It would also prepare for presidential and parliamentary elections in Gaza and the West Bank, and reform Palestinian security services.

Hamas and Fatah delegations held talks on Monday with Egyptian intelligence Chief Omar Suleiman, who has led Egypt's efforts to heal the Palestinian rift. Suleiman told the factions their failure to reunite was "harmful to the entire Palestinian cause", a Palestinian official said.

Hamas had previously warned a deal would not be possible unless Fatah stopped arresting its members in the West Bank and released a significant number of the 920 Hamas supporters held by Fatah. It has dismissed previous releases as being cosmetic and usually followed by fresh arrests.

Fatah has said Hamas is holding nearly 300 of its men in jails in the Gaza Strip, which is run by the Islamist group.

"We told Fatah we were ready to end the issue of political detainees in 24 hours. We hope they would have the same spirit," Rishiq said.

Zakaria al-Agha, a senior Fatah negotiator, said missing the July 7 deadline would be "bad news to the Palestinian people and was disappointing".

"We had hoped the differences would be resolved, and the Egyptian brothers tried but they did not succeed and, therefore, the deadline was postponed," Agha said.

He hoped the two groups would reach a deal by July 28 "if they showed honest intentions and put the national interest ahead of everything else".

If they fail, unity efforts could freeze until after the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan due to begin in August, an official close to the talks said.

Adding to tensions, security services loyal to Abbas in the West Bank said on Monday they had arrested 10 Hamas activists who had planned attacks, a charge Hamas denied. An Abbas aide said the arrests showed Hamas had no intent to reach a deal.

Hamas's Rishiq accused Fatah of making "fabrications" to pursue a crackdown against his group in the West Bank, casting doubt over the likelihood of a deal by the new deadline.

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