

Israel reduces Gaza fishing zone, attacks Palestinian fishermen



Ramallah, May 20 (RHC)-- Israeli authorities have reduced the permitted fishing zone off the coast of the besieged Gaza Strip "until further notice" -- less than one week after lifting a ban on Palestinian fishing boats operating off the coastal enclave.

The head of the Fishermen Committees in the Union of Agricultural Work Committees, Zakaria Bakr, told Palestinian Ma'an news agency that the fishing zone had been reduced from 12 nautical miles to only five nautical miles.

Bakr added that Israeli naval forces prevented Palestinian fishermen from retrieving their fishing nets, which they had cast seven nautical miles off Gaza's coast. The Palestinian official noted that Israeli forces opened heavy fire at the fishermen who sought to cross the five nautical miles, forcing them to sail back to the shore for fear of their lives.

The development came less than a week after Israeli officials lifted a ban on Palestinian fishing boats operating off the Gaza Strip, ending a measure imposed during a deadly flare-up of violence earlier this month.

The fishing union in the Gaza Strip confirmed the lifting of the ban, saying Palestinians were allowed fishing up to 12 nautical miles in the southern half of Gaza, while the fishing zone was six nautical miles in

the north.

Four Israelis and 27 Palestinians, including two pregnant women and three children, were killed after three days of deadly Israeli airstrikes and retaliatory Palestinian rocket attacks earlier this month. The two sides reached a ceasefire agreement on May 6th with the help of Egyptian and Qatari mediators.

Under the Oslo Accords signed in 1993, Israel is obligated to permit fishing up to 20 nautical miles off the coast of the Gaza Strip, but this has never been implemented. The Oslo Accords were signed between the Israeli regime and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) during the early-mid 1990s to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Israel maintains a heavy naval presence off the coast of the impoverished Palestinian enclave, severely affecting the livelihoods of some 4,000 fishermen and at least 1,500 more people involved in the fishing industry.

Over the past few years, Israeli forces have carried out more than a hundred attacks on Palestinian boats, arresting dozens of fishermen and confiscating several boats.

The Gaza Strip has been under an Israeli blockade since June 2007. The blockade has caused a severe decline in the standard of living as well as unprecedented levels of unemployment and unrelenting poverty.

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