Israel prepares to receive first dead hostages from Hamas

Hamas is to transfer to Israel the bodies of four hostages who have been held in Gaza since being taken alive in the group's attack on Israel on 7 October 2023.

Hamas says the fourth body is that of Oded Lifshitz, 84, a veteran peace activist.It will mark the first time the group will have handed over dead hostages since the ceasefire began last month.Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu said "the heart of the entire nation is torn", adding that Israel was dealing with "monsters".Six living hostages are due to be freed on Saturday.

We must be clear: any degrading treatment during release operations is unacceptable," it said in a statement on Wednesday night.It follows widespread denunciation of the way in which Hamas has released hostages in recent weeks in staged events where they have been put on platforms in front on crowds of spectators before being handed over to the Red Cross representatives.

It is not known how Shiri, Kfir and his brother Ariel - if confirmed - died. Hamas claimed in November 2023 that they had been killed in an Israeli air strike, without providing evidence. At the time, then-member of Israel's war cabinet Benny Gantz said there was no confirmation of the claim

Oded Lifshitz, a retired journalist, was also taken from Nir Oz, along with this wife, Yocheved. The eighty-five year-old woman was freed by Hamas two weeks later.

Oded Lifshitz had been held by the armed Palestinian group Islamic Jihad since 7 October 2023.The release of hostages' bodies was agreed as part of the ceasefire deal which came into effect on 19 January. Israel has confirmed there will be eight. Talks on progressing to the next phase of the deal - under which the remaining living hostages would be released and the war would end permanently - were due to start earlier this month but have not yet begun.

Twenty-four hostages and over 1,000 prisoners have so far been exchanged.Seventy hostages taken on 7 October are still being held in Gaza. Three other hostages, taken over a decade ago, are also being held. About half of all the hostages still in Gaza are believed to be alive.