



Israel releases Palestinian prisoners after Hamas hands over four hostages' bodies



Hamas has handed over what it says are the bodies of four Israeli hostages from Gaza, in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners.

Israel is testing DNA samples to confirm they are the remains of Shlomo Mansour, 86, Ohad Yahalomi, 50, Tsachi Idan, 50, and Itzik Elgarat, 69, all of whom were taken by Hamas in the 7 October 2023 attacks. Early on Thursday, Israel began releasing more than 600 Palestinian prisoners, with dozens returned to the occupied West Bank and Gaza, where they were met by jubilant crowds.

It will be the final exchange of the first phase of the ceasefire deal, which is due to end on Saturday. Initial testing of the four bodies' DNA was expected to happen close to the Israel-Gaza border. Israeli media later reported they were transported to a forensics laboratory in Tel Aviv. It comes after the body of a Palestinian woman from Gaza was handed over by Hamas to Israel instead of the body of Israeli Shiri Bibas last Thursday, prompting fury in Israel. Hamas said it was a mistake and later handed over Bibas's body.

Hamas transferred the latest bodies privately, with no public ceremony, unlike in previous exchanges. Israel has accused Hamas of orchestrating "humiliating" handover ceremonies, and delayed last weekend's prisoner release because of what it said was the cruel treatment of hostages at the handovers. Before Wednesday's releases, a Hamas official told the AFP news agency that the return of the four bodies would take place "without public presence to prevent the occupation from finding any pretext for delay or obstruction". Released by Reuters show a bus carrying what are believed to be Palestinian prisoners out of Ofer prison in the West Bank late on Wednesday. Israel said earlier that prisoners would also be released from Ketziot prison in southern Israel, as well as from Ofer.

The Hamas-run Prisoners' Media Office said a hospital in Gaza was preparing to receive the released Palestinians. In a statement via the Hostages and Missing Families Forum, Tsachi's family said it was "with great sadness" that they had learnt "our beloved Tsachi is no longer alive and that his body will be returned to Israel during the night". Itzik Elgarat, 69, was kidnapped from Nir Oz, another kibbutz, and reportedly shot in the hand during the attack. His phone was traced to Gaza following the attack. Ohad Yahalomi, 50, was abducted from Nir Oz, along with his 12-year-old son, Eitan, who was released during the November ceasefire.

The IDF said in February that it had informed the family of Iraq-born Shlomo Mansour, 86, that he was killed by Hamas on 7 October 2023 and his body taken to Gaza.