

Israel attacks Gaza aid fleet - Up to 16 people were killed

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**Israeli commandos attacked the boats and shot with live bullets the passengers.
Latest figure is 16 dead!
The boats have been hijacked and are being towed towards Haïfa.**

Israel attacks Gaza aid fleet

Aid convoy was attacked 65km off the Gaza coast

Israeli forces have attacked a flotilla of aid-carrying ships aiming to break the country's siege on Gaza.

Up to 16 people were killed and more than 30 people injured when troops stormed the Freedom Flotilla early on Monday, the Israeli Army Radio said.

The flotilla was attacked in international waters, 65km off the Gaza coast.

Footage from the flotilla's lead vessel, the Mavi Marmara, showed armed Israeli soldiers boarding the ship and helicopters flying overhead.

Al Jazeera's Jamal Elshayyal, on board the Mavi Marmara, said Israeli troops had used live ammunition during the operation.

The Israeli Army Radio said soldiers opened fire "after confronting those on board carrying sharp objects".

Free Gaza Movement, the organisers of the flotilla, however, said the troops opened fire as soon as they stormed the ships.

They also said the ships were now being towed to the Israeli town of Haifa, instead of Ashdod to avoid waiting journalists.

Earlier, the Israeli navy had contacted the captain of the Mavi Marmara, asking him to identify himself and say where the ship was headed.

Israeli intervention

Shortly after, two Israeli naval vessels had flanked the flotilla on either side, but at a distance.

Organisers of the flotilla carrying 10,000 tonnes of humanitarian aid then diverted their ships and

slowed down to avoid a confrontation during the night.

They also issued all passengers life jackets and asked them to remain below deck.

Al Jazeera's Ayman Mohyeldin, reporting from Jerusalem, said the Israeli action was surprising.

"All the images being shown from the activists on board those ships show clearly that they were civilians and peaceful in nature, with medical supplies on board. So it will surprise many in the international community to learn what could have possibly led to this type of confrontation," he said.

Protests

Condemnation has been quick to pour in after the Israeli action.

Thousands of Turkish protesters tried to storm the Israeli consulate in Istanbul soon after the news of the operation broke. The protesters shouted "Damn Israel" as police blocked them.

Turkey is also reported to have summoned the Israeli ambassador to lodge a protest.

Meanwhile, Ismail Haniya, the Hamas leader in Gaza, has dubbed the Israeli action as "barbaric".

Hundreds of pro-Palestinian activists, including a Nobel laureate and several European legislators, are with the flotilla, aiming to reach Gaza in defiance of an Israeli embargo.

But Israel has said it will not allow the flotilla to reach the Gaza Strip and vowed to stop the six ships from reaching the coastal Palestinian territory.

The flotilla had set sail from a port in Cyprus on Sunday and aimed to reach Gaza by Monday morning.

Israel said the boats were embarking on "an act of provocation" against the Israeli military, rather than providing aid, and that it had issued warrants to prohibit their entrance to Gaza.

It asserted that the flotilla would be breaking international law by landing in Gaza, a claim the organisers rejected.

P.S.

* <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2010/05/201053133047995359.html>