**UN seeks international Gaza flotilla probe, despite internal Israeli inquiry**

Iranian ship claiming to be carrying humanitarian aid bound for the Gaza Strip left the port city of Bandar-Abbas.

By Barak Ravid, Amos Harel, Shlomo Shamir, Tomer Zarchin and Yossi Melman

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An Iranian ship claiming to be carrying humanitarian aid bound for the Gaza Strip left the port city of Bandar-Abbas on Sunday. Iranian television broadcast footage of the ship, which is a freighter that can hold just a few dozen crewmen on board.

In addition, another Gaza-bound ship is expected to sail from Lebanon. The Israel Defense Forces regard this ship as a greater nuisance, given the short distance separating Lebanon and Gaza.

Undeterred by the government's decision yesterday to establish an independent public committee into the raid against the Gaza-bound flotilla, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon is moving forward with plans to form an internationally sanctioned investigative forum to probe the deadly events.

According to UN sources at the world body's headquarters in New York, Ban is holding discussions with the five permanent members of the Security Council while seeking the advice of international observers, all in an effort to formulate an "international authority" that would investigate the Israel Navy's takeover of the Turkish ship Mavi Marmara on May 31.

UN sources added, however, that Ban was not interested in dispatching an investigative committee similar to that headed by South African judge Richard Goldstone, who probed the Operation Cast Lead military offensive in the Gaza Strip.

After a three-hour discussion, the cabinet yesterday approved the public committee into the Gaza flotilla events in a unanimous vote. "It is not ideal, but the other options are less good," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said regarding the probe. "The flotilla to Gaza was not a one-time incident. We are in the midst of a difficult and continuous fight against the State of Israel."

A retired Supreme Court justice, Jacob Turkel, will head the committee, which will also include two international observers and tackle the legality of the blockade of Gaza and the legality of the navy's actions.

Despite the government's decision, Netanyahu stressed yesterday that Jerusalem remains wary of continued attempts by international players to establish further inquiries. Aside from Ban's efforts, Turkey's outright dismissal of the Israeli panel gives Jerusalem pause.

"We believe that Israel, as a country which attacked a civil convoy in international waters, will not conduct an impartial inquiry," Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said yesterday. "If an international commission is not set up and Turkey's rightful demands are ignored, Turkey has the right to review its relations with Israel," Davutoglu said at a press conference in Ankara.

Netanyahu also remains concerned after the United States did not explicitly pledge to veto any resolution brought before the Security Council that calls for an international inquiry. Washington has thus far made do with a statement praising the IDF for its investigative procedures.

The European Union urged Israel yesterday to lift its blockade of the Gaza Strip, and called for "credible international participation" in an investigation of the flotilla raid. In Luxembourg, Mideast mediator Tony Blair said he hopes Israel will soon ease the three-year-old blockade by allowing commercial goods and reconstruction materials to flow into the Palestinian territory.

Netanyahu raised eyebrows yesterday by nominating to the panel individuals who have long ended their public service careers. The average age of the Israeli committee members is 84. The head of the panel, Turkel, is 75 years old; Professor Shabtai Rosen, a renowned international law expert, is 93 and Maj. Gen. (res. ) Amos Horev is 86. Judges in Israel retire at the age of 70.

Legal experts were also puzzled at Israel's decision to allow foreigners to observe the panel's work. "I do not know of an internal inquiry committee that has international observers," said Professor Yoram Dinstein, an expert in international law. "This is very strange."

In addition to the Turkel committee, State Comptroller Micha Lindenstrauss is likely to probe two main issues related to the flotilla raid if such an inquiry is launched. A Lindenstrauss probe would partially focus on the role of the National Security Council in the decision-making process that preceded the raid, and it would also delve into Israel's public relations campaign in the raid's aftermath.