

U.N. Starts Talks to Free Peacekeepers Held by Syria Rebels
By Alan Cowell and Rick Gladstone, New York Times
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United Nations and Arab League officials were reported to be negotiating on Thursday with Syrian rebels who seized a group of United Nations troops on patrol in the disputed Golan Heights region between Syria and Israel, seeking to defuse an abrupt escalation of the Syrian conflict that enmeshed international peacekeepers for the first time.

Significantly, Israel signaled on Thursday that it had no intention of becoming embroiled in the crisis.

There was no immediate indication when the 21 captives, all from the Philippines, who were seized on Wednesday, might be freed but the authorities in Manila said the peacekeepers were being treated as “visitors and guests” and had not been harmed.

“The negotiations are ongoing,” said Raul Hernandez, a spokesman for Philippines Foreign Ministry. “This is between the U.N. peacekeeping force and the group leader of this rebel force. We have been informed that they are unharmed and for the time being they are being treated as visitors and guests.”

Rebel video on the Internet showed six Filipino soldiers in their camouflage uniform in a room with pale, heavy drapes.

With 1,011 troops, the United Nations observer force in the Golan is responsible for maintaining the calm between Israeli and Syrian troops at the demilitarized zone along Syria’s Golan frontier, established after a cease-fire ended the 1973 Arab-Israeli war.

Israeli officials have expressed concern about the presence of Islamic extremist groups fighting the Syrian Army close to the cease-fire line with Israel. In recent months, Israel has upgraded its troops and surveillance along its northern frontier and is constructing a new border fence.

Distancing Israel from events across the cease-fire line on Thursday, Amos Gilad, a senior official in the Israeli Defense Ministry, said that “we can rely on the U.N. to persuade” the insurgent fighters to release the captive troops.

“Neither the rebels nor anyone else has an interest in clashing with the international community, which it needs for support,” Mr. Gilad told Israel Radio, adding, “The international community will handle this.”

A spokesman for the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an activist group based in Britain, said on Thursday that the captors had “assured us they are not going to harm the hostages in any way and they’re treating them as guests.”

The observatory, which has a network of opposition contacts in Syria, also reported “clashes” between government troops and rebels on Thursday on the northern outskirts of the village of Al Jamlah, close to where the Filipino soldiers were seized. There was no immediate independent confirmation of the report.

The activist group said Arab League representatives had joined United Nations officials at the negotiations with the hostage-takers.

The rebels were seeking a truce and a secure exit route for the Filipino soldiers from Al Jamlah village so that they could be handed over to international forces in the Quneitra border region.

The insurgents are pressing for government forces to pull back heavy weaponry, the observatory said, and allow villagers to return to villages they have fled because of recent fighting without risking further artillery bombardment. As the Syrian civil war has worsened, the Golan region has been periodically disrupted by armed clashes and occasional artillery or mortar bombardments that have become a source of concern to Israel. But United Nations officials said that members of the Golan peacekeeping mission, officially known as the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, had never before been taken by any of the combatants in the conflict.

The scale of the destruction wrought by the almost two-year-old conflict emerged starkly on Thursday when Doctors Without Borders, a humanitarian aid organization, said that Syria's once-efficient health care network had broken down, with patients treated in caves and basements as large numbers of hospitals closed and medical facilities became tools "in the military strategies of the parties to the conflict."

The report, issued in New York, added to a catalog of woes this week as the number of refugees fleeing the country exceeded a million and the schools system was reported to have collapsed.

"Medical aid is being targeted, hospitals destroyed, and medical personnel captured," said Marie-Pierre Allié, the president of Doctors without Borders.

Josephine Guerrero, a spokeswoman for the department at the United Nations that oversees the Golan operation, said the peacekeepers were detained near an observation post that had been evacuated over the past weekend after what she called "heavy combat in proximity" in the southern part of the area they control. The peacekeepers, in a convoy of trucks, had returned to investigate damage to the post when they were taken by about 30 armed rebels.

Ms. Guerrero said that the peacekeeping mission was "dispatching a team to assess the situation and attempt a resolution," and that the Syrian authorities had been asked to help.

The Philippine government said on Thursday that it had been told by the United Nations that 21 of its peacekeepers were detained.

President Benigno S. Aquino III of the Philippines said he believed the peacekeepers would be viewed by both sides in the Syrian conflict as a "benign presence, so we don't expect any further untoward incident to happen."

Foreign Minister Albert F. del Rosario told reporters that the authorities in Manila were working "very closely" with the United Nations, the United States, Britain, France and Germany "for the early and safe release of the Filipino peacekeepers."

A video uploaded on YouTube by a group that identified itself as the Martyrs of Yarmouk claimed responsibility on Wednesday and said the peacekeepers would be held until Syrian government forces withdrew from the area around Al Jamlah, the site of the weekend clashes. The video does not show any of the captives, but United Nations vehicles are visible.

A speaker in the video warns in Arabic: "If the withdrawal does not take place within 24 hours, we will deal with those guys like war prisoners. And praise to God."

The threat underscored the widening risk that the Syrian conflict is destabilizing the Middle East and raised new concerns about the agendas of some Syrian insurgent groups, just as Western nations, including the United States, were grappling over whether to arm them.

At the United Nations, Ambassador Vitaly I. Churkin of Russia, which holds the monthly presidency of the Security Council for March, said that members had been briefed about the Golan situation but that he could provide no further information on what precisely had happened.

Mr. Churkin, whose government is a main supporter of the Syrian government in the conflict and a strong critic of the armed rebels, urged the captors to release the peacekeepers immediately. "They should stop this very dangerous course of action," he told reporters.

The detention of the peacekeepers came less than a week after Croatia announced it was withdrawing its soldiers from the Golan force, which also includes troops from Austria and India, after reports that Croatia was selling weapons funneled to Syrian rebels by Saudi Arabia, a main supporter of the insurgency. The Croatian government denied the reports but said they had put the safety of its peacekeepers at risk.

News of the peacekeepers' seizure coincided with other milestones in the two-year Syrian conflict, which has left more than 70,000 people dead.

The United Nations refugee agency in Geneva said on Wednesday the number of Syrians who had fled to neighboring countries surpassed the one million mark, coupling the announcement with a renewed appeal for more aid. "Syria is spiraling toward full-scale disaster," the United Nations High Commissioner for refugees, António Guterres, said in a statement.

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