

GAZA CITY, Aug 5 (AP) - A cease-fire between Israel and Hamas meant to last at least three days and end nearly a month of fighting went into effect in the Gaza Strip on Tuesday morning. The truce came ahead of talks in Cairo aimed at brokering a deal that would prevent future cross-border violence.

The temporary truce, agreed to by both sides, started at 8 a.m. (0500 GMT) and was to last for 72 hours during which Israel and Hamas are to hold indirect talks in the Egyptian capital.

But wide gaps remain and previous international attempts to broker a temporary halt in the fighting have failed. Hamas wants Israel and Egypt to lift their seven-year-old Gaza border blockade. Israel is reluctant to open Gaza's borders unless Hamas is disarmed.

The situation is still volatile. Just minutes ahead of the start of the truce, shelling still echoed across Gaza and Israel said Hamas fired a heavy barrage of rockets at southern and central Israel.

The war broke out on July 8 when Israel launched airstrikes it said were in response to weeks of heavy rocket fire out of Hamas-controlled Gaza. It expanded the operation on July 17 by sending in ground forces in what it described as a mission to destroy a network of tunnels used to stage attacks.

The fighting has claimed nearly 1,900 Palestinian lives - most of them civilians. The war has also left 67 dead on the Israeli side, all but three of them soldiers.

Talks in Cairo will be crucial in the coming days. Ending the Gaza conflict without a sustainable truce raises the probability of more cross-border fighting in the future. In the hours leading up to the cease-fire, there were also signs of tensions created by the Gaza fighting spreading to Jerusalem and the West Bank, including two attacks police say were carried out by Palestinian militants.

A unilateral withdrawal would have allowed Israel to end the conflict on its own terms, without engaging in protracted negotiations with Hamas over new border arrangements in Gaza. In such talks, brokered by Egypt, Israel would be asked for concessions it has been unwilling to make, such as opening Gaza's borders.

Earlier Tuesday, the Israeli military announced that all its ground troops would leave Gaza by the start of the new cease-fire.

Military spokesman Lt. Col. Peter Lerner said the withdrawal was going forward after Israel neutralized cross-border tunnels that were built for Islamic militant attacks inside Israel.

"Overnight, we completed the destruction of 32 tunnels in the Gaza Strip," Lerner said. "They were part of a strategic Hamas plan to carry out attacks against southern Israel."

The rocket fire continued throughout the war, and by the time Tuesday's cease-fire went into effect, some 3,500 rockets had been fired at Israel, Lerner said. He estimated that Israeli forces destroyed another 3,000 rockets on the ground - but that Hamas has an equal number for future use.

Lerner declined to say how many ground forces had been involved in the Israeli operation, though the military acknowledged calling up 86,000 reservists, including rotations, during the course of its Gaza operation.