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Turkish PM uses Gaza trip as key to Israel apology

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SERKAN DEMİRTAŞ

ANKARA – Hürriyet Daily News

The Turkish prime minister has expressed his desire to visit Hamas-controlled Gaza after a trip to Egypt, a move he will reportedly make if Israel refuses to apologize to Turkey over last year's deadly flotilla raid.

"I wish to go to Gaza. If the necessary conditions emerge, I have a desire to go there," Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan told a press conference Tuesday at Ankara's Eserboğa airport before departing for northern Cyprus. He did not elaborate further but said the Foreign Ministry was working to arrange the trip, a move that has drawn criticism from Israel.

According to diplomatic sources, Erdoğan was planning to cross into Gaza from the Rafah gate with Egypt during his trip to the country July 21.

Taking into consideration that the U.N. panel on Gaza will release its report on the Mavi Marmara incident on July 27, the prime minister decided to postpone the Gaza part of his trip due to the possibility of an apology from Israel. If this does not happen before the U.N. report is released, Erdoğan is reportedly considering going to Gaza during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, which starts Aug. 1, and breaking the Israeli embargo himself.

Feridun Sinirlioğlu, undersecretary of the Turkish Foreign Ministry and Moshe Yalon, the vice prime minister of the Israeli government, have been in secret talks in recent weeks to formulate how Israel would apologize to Turkey and pay compensation to the families of the nine Turkish citizens killed onboard the Gaza-bound aid ship. The U.N. inquiry panel is expected to submit its report to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on July 27 and the report is set to be released Aug. 1.

The Daily News has learned that a draft text was introduced to both countries' prime ministers and a last meeting before July 27 is expected to take place in New York. Turkey has made it clear that if there will be no agreement on an apology, it stands ready to take further steps that would cause a deeper deterioration of bilateral ties.

In this sense, Erdoğan's statement that he would visit Gaza and meet with Hamas leaders is seen as one of these steps. Israel's defense establishment may support a "cautious" apology to Ankara for its deadly raid last year on the Mavi Marmara, Israel's daily Haaretz reported Sunday.

Erdoğan's possible visit was first reported in the Palestinian media over the weekend. The report caused fury on the Israeli side. Turkey is working for intra-Palestinian reconciliation and the visit to Gaza, if it happens, will come after Hamas leader Khaleed Mashal met with Turkish officials in Istanbul in June. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is set to visit Turkey on July 21 to attend the conference of Palestinian ambassadors in Istanbul