

## **Gazans stage mass protest against Israeli blockade**

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Source: Reuters

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Palestinians attend a human chain protest calling for an end of the Israeli blockade on Gaza, February 25, 2008.

**REUTERS/Suhaib Salem**

BEIT HANOUN, Gaza Strip, Feb 25 (Reuters) - Thousands of Palestinians formed a human chain in the Gaza Strip on Monday in a protest against an Israeli blockade that has deepened hardship in the Hamas-controlled territory.

Israel had put troops on alert along the frontier and threatened to open fire if protesters tried to surge across the border. Organisers had forecast 40,000 to 50,000 participants but only about 4,500 people turned out in inclement weather.

Although the event, promoted by Hamas Islamists and allied activists, was peaceful, militants in the Gaza Strip fired rockets at southern Israel while the protest was under way, wounding a child.

After the human chain broke up, Palestinian youngsters hurled rocks at Israeli soldiers at Gaza's Erez border crossing. The Israeli army said it detained 50 stone-throwers.

Gaza's isolation intensified when Hamas took control of the area in June after street fighting in which it routed Fatah forces loyal to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who has embarked on peace talks with Israel.

Last month, Israel tightened the blockade on the territory of 1.5 million people, limiting supplies of fuel and other goods in what it described as a response to cross-border rocket fire by militants.

Militants say they carry out such attacks in response to Israeli raids and would stop if Israel, which pulled troops and settlers out of the Gaza Strip in 2005, lifted the blockade.

Sami Abu Zuhri, a Hamas official, said the human chain was a message to Israel "and many other parties that Gaza has become a ticking bomb that could explode at any time if the siege is not lifted".

Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Arye Mekel said Israel wanted to avoid any humanitarian crisis in Gaza and was working with the United Nations and other organisations to prevent one.

Egypt has also blocked its border with Gaza but Hamas blew open the frontier wall last month, allowing hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to cross into Egypt and stock up with food and other goods in short supply.

Hamas is shunned by Israel and the West for refusing to give up its stated goal of seeing the Jewish state eliminated. It has, however, offered a sceptical Israel a conditional, long-term ceasefire.

"Peace and dialogue are not an option for them (Hamas)," Mekel said, calling for the group's continued international isolation. (Writing by Jeffrey Heller; Editing by Janet Lawrence)