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Family of Captured Israeli Soldier Press for Deal

By DINA KRAFT



Alex Rozkovsky/Reuters

Noam Shalit, third from left, and his wife, Aviva, marched Sunday in the Israeli city of Nahariya, pressing for the release of their son Gilad Shalit.

TEL AVIV — The family of Staff Sgt. Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier who has been held captive by Hamas in Gaza for four years, began a march to Jerusalem on Sunday aimed at pressing the government to make a deal for the soldier's release.

"We won't wait any longer in our home," said Noam Shalit, the soldier's father, as the march began. He said Israel's leaders "have to put an end to this sad saga."

The march began two days after the fourth anniversary of Sergeant Shalit's capture and a week after Israel relaxed a blockade against Gaza that had been imposed in part to press for his release.

Israel scaled back the embargo in response to tremendous pressure after its deadly raid on a [flotilla](#) of aid ships last month aimed at breaking the blockade. Now the Shalits say they fear their son has been forgotten. Vowing not to return without him, the Shalits, accompanied by thousands of supporters, set out on foot from their home in the Galilee on a planned 12-day march via villages, winding roads and highways.

“We want to see not just efforts but results,” Mr. Shalit said.

Negotiations between Israel and Hamas, the militant Islamist movement that rules Gaza, over the 23-year-old soldier have repeatedly collapsed. In exchange for his release, Hamas has demanded the release of as many as 1,000 Palestinians in Israeli prisons, including some convicted of organizing suicide bombings and other attacks.

The Shalits’ plight resonates deeply in a country where most Jewish citizens are drafted into the army at 18 and which has hewed to an ethos of not leaving soldiers behind. Sergeant Shalit was captured by Hamas and other militant groups during a cross-border raid on his tank unit and taken to Gaza in 2006.

Hamas has not allowed Sergeant Shalit visits from the International Red Cross. The only signs of life his family has received have been a short video and two letters.

Palestinian families are also deeply vested in prospects for a deal, as many of them have relatives in Israeli prisons.

Raanan Sulitzeanu-Kenan, a political science lecturer at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, said he doubted the march would have “a major impact on decision making.”

“I am hearing new sounds from the political elite saying that of course they need to work on the release of Gilad Shalit but that this pressure needs to be directed towards Hamas, not the government,” he said. “They argue such public pressure weakens the Israeli position within the negotiations and could lead to more demands from Hamas.”

Israel has agreed to disproportionate prisoner swaps in the past, but there is concern among officials that another mass exchange would only encourage future hostage taking.

“This is a debate between the head and heart, and everyone has both,” Yaacov Amidror, a general in the Israeli reserves, said in an interview with Israel Radio. “Those who let the head take over feel that there is a limit to what a state should pay. I believe that in principle negotiations should not be held with terror organizations.”

Nevertheless, there appears to be a groundswell of Israeli public support for such a deal.

A weekend poll in Israel’s largest newspaper, Yediot Ahronot, found that 72 percent of Israelis polled said they supported a prisoner exchange, even if it included the release of hundreds of terrorists, including killers.

“Gilad Shalit is a national trauma,” Sima Kadmon, a Yediot Ahronot columnist, wrote Friday. “He is the symbol of our powerlessness. Of the fact that the Israel Defense Forces cannot solve everything and of the fact that not everything can be fixed by force, and perhaps, of the fact that not everything can always be resolved.”

In another development, the Israeli Supreme Court freed a group of Hasidic fathers on Sunday who had been sent to jail for refusing to obey a court order against the ethnic segregation of their daughters’ school. The men were released after a compromise was struck that the girls would study together until Wednesday, the end of the school year. The sides, all from the Jewish settlement of Immanuel in the West Bank, promised to try to resolve their differences over the summer vacation.

The fathers, who are Ashkenazi, or of European descent, had refused to let their daughters study with those from Sephardic families of North African and Middle Eastern descent.