

TRANSCRIPT:

BBC News Hour anchor Caltriona Perry interview with Israeli economics minister Nir Barkat.

...Pressure is also building inside Israel, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government grows increasingly unpopular. He has faced criticism over his failure to rescue the remaining hostages from Gaza. Relatives of the hostages joined a protest inside the Knesset parliament building on Wednesday. For more on the Israeli government's response I spoke with Nir Barkat, the country's minister of economy and industry.

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We've seen more protests at the Knesset today. There's anger with Prime Minister Netanyahu's approach to the war, his failure so far to bring home all of the hostages. Are you happy with how Prime Minister Netanyahu is handling this war?

Well, I think Israel is united. Together. Fighting together, understanding that what happened to us on October 7th we have not seen since the days of the Nazis. And we all understand that it's a long haul. And we understand that we have to wipe Hamas off the face of the Earth, similarly to the way the Nazis were wiped out in the Second World War, and the Japanese needed to surrender -- full surrender, 100% surrender -- before the war was over. We need to get there. And there are differences of opinion -- with democracy that's fine -- but generally the whole country is united. We have a war cabinet that is comprised of what was opposition and coalition together, and we are in this together. I believe we are doing the right thing.

You mentioned the war cabinet there. Your fellow war cabinet member Benny Gantz is today calling for elections by September. He wants a change of leadership. Do you agree with that? Is it time for Prime Minister Netanyahu to move along? Should there be elections?

I think we should come to terms on how to move forward. Right now, let's focus on winning the war. We still have about a fourth of Hamas -- a fourth of the Nazis -- in Rafah and other places. We have to finish the war and then discuss together how we move on.

Okay, well let's talk about the Israeli killing of seven aid workers in Gaza yesterday. Aid workers from World Central Kitchen, a charity that has been feeding Israelis as well as Palestinians. Prime Minister Netanyahu said that those killings were unintended. You were a major in the IDF so I just want to ask you, how do you unintentionally kill aid workers travelling in vehicles that are well marked as ????? of aid workers, and whose movements have been coordinated with the IDF.

Well first of all it's a tragedy, and condolences to the family. I want to share with you that unfortunately in wars friendly fire happens. Over 30 Israeli soldiers were killed by friendly fire. Actually, three of the kidnapped people were unfortunately killed in friendly fire. It's part of war. We do everything we can that it will not happen, and learn the incident and make sure it doesn't happen again. But it's part of war, and we are terribly sorry, the same way that we're sorry that *our* soldiers were killed from our own soldiers. This is the way we view it. We're very sorry and we'll do everything we can to make sure that things like this do not happen again.

Just to jump in there. You're talking about friendly fire. But in this case this was not one vehicle. This was three vehicles. They were some distance apart. These missiles landed some distance apart. And the IDF was aware of what was going on. So how is that "friendly fire"?

Friendly in the sense that I'm sure that the people that eventually were attacking believed that this is NOT friendly. I mean nobody wants to kill their own soldiers and people that we love and we appreciate.

We're talking about this specific incident though, minister. You know, you could say perhaps the mistake happens once, but how does it happen a second time and a third time, some distance down the road?

Again, I want to mention the fact that war, unfortunately, there are people that get killed, civilians get killed. In the Second World War over 33 million civilians were killed in the war. And of course nobody -- at least we don't intend to kill any civilians. We target the terrorists, the ones that committed those evil crimes. And don't get confused. The evil in this story is [are?] Hamas.

Okay, we'll come to the killing of civilians in just one moment, but just to stick with the killing of aid workers: 196 of them in total have been killed in Gaza in these six months. José Andrés, who is the founder of the World Central

Kitchen charity where these seven aid workers were working, he says that they were targeted, that these missiles came systematically, car by car. He says the workers tried to call the IDF in between the strikes. He said this was not a bad luck situation, that they were targeted. Are you saying they were not targeted? Is that what you're saying?

With all due respect, there's no way in the world that Israel would target people that come to give people aid. That's nonsense. I'm sorry. Give us a bit of respect, that we care about those people. And it's the same people that help Israel. We will never target people like this. I'm sure that there was a mistake done on the way, and the Israeli Army will interrogate this, and give the families of the people that unfortunately were killed all the details. And we want to make sure it doesn't happen again. It's not intentional. With all due respect, I'll tell you what is intentional -- Hamas. On October 7th they entered the villages in Israel. They raped, they group-raped women, killed them while they're raping them. Took them -- now we have 134, I don't understand why you're not asking about 134 hostages, that were taken from their *homes*. Women, children -- we know from testimony that they are raped there. Why aren't you asking about that? *That's intentional. That is intentional.*

Minister, my first question actually referenced those Israeli hostages that are still in Gaza. We are of course very aware of that, and it was my first question to you.

[Talking during her comment just above.] It was intentional. What happened ?with the aid workers was UNintentional.

I just want to stick with this point for a moment. Those aid workers were there trying to get food to the people in Gaza. The IPC -- the International Food Security Phase Classification -- they have said that over a million people are currently at risk of starvation. Two million people have food insecurity. Why will Israel not let adequate food supplies, adequate medical supplies, in to those innocent civilians who are in such desperate need.

First of all, we are. Israel has opened its gates and is allowing people to aid the people that are innocent. And unfortunately, by the way, the food and...

Not at adequate levels though, Minister. Not at adequate levels. Why would so many people be starving if that was the case?

With all due respect, go to Hamas. Ask the Hamas leaders, why don't they surrender? The minute they surrender, the war is over. They are terrorists. They are people that deliberately kill Israelis. They want to wipe Israel off the map. They are hiding behind the civilians. And what they want is the world to attack Israel, instead of attacking the terrorists, the jihadists, the Muslim Brotherhood that are connected between Hamas, Hezbollah, of course you've got Iran, and another terrorist group, and that is Qatar.

Minister, we are asking you about things that -- you are an Israeli minister, you are a member of the war cabinet, that's why we're asking you about matters that pertain to Israel and which are in your control, and which you are a decision-maker.

What is it that has relevance to Israel, with all due respect? You have to attack the evil. You have to attack the evil people that intentionally target women, raping women, they use rape as a tool to scare Jews and Israelis. That's what you should be focused on. You should focus on Qatar, that are funding ISIS, they are funding Al-Qaeda, they are funding Hamas. Why don't you ask about them? They're the evil guys.

I'm asking you to account for the actions of Israel. I can't ask you those questions. You do not speak for Hamas, obviously, or Qatar. I am asking you in relation to Israel. The UN says it's going to suspend operations in Gaza at night because of its concerns over security after that air strike on those aid workers. Can Israel guarantee the safety of aid workers in Gaza now?

We will do everything we can. We did before and it's an unfortunate accident, like over 30 Israeli soldiers were killed *by accident*. It was not intentional for the Israeli army to kill our own people. It was not intentional for the Israeli army to kill unfortunately three of the hostages that escaped Hamas. And we don't deliberately kill innocent people. That's not Israel. That's not the Jewish heart. That's not the Jewish DNA. Our DNA is to defend ourselves from terrorists that committed crimes against humanity, that entered Israel, raped people, killed people one by one, just because they're Jews and Israelis.

We do not forget that 1200 civilians were killed on October 7th in horrific circumstances. Nobody forgets that. Just one final quick question: Some British members of Parliament are now calling for the UK to hold its arms sales to Israel because of the killing of these aid workers. What's your response to that?

Did they tell the British army, going into Dresden in the Second World War, the same thing? This is totally double standard. We will finish this up. We didn't start this war. We're not fighting only our war. The Muslim Brotherhood that are attacking moderate Arab states, they are fearful; they are aligned with Iran against the moderate Arab states and Israel *they* are the evil.

We're just out of time for today. Minister of economy and industry of Israel Nir Barkat, thank you very much for joining us on BBC News. Thank you.

Thank you very much.