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Israel and Turkey in 'secret' talks

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An Israeli cabinet minister and Turkey's foreign minister have met in secret.

Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, Israel's trade and industry minister, met Ahmet Davutoglu in Brussels to discuss ways of repairing bilateral ties, media reports in Israel and Turkey said on Thursday.

While Turkish diplomat confirmed that the two had met in Brussels, Israeli officials refused to be drawn on the talks, saying only that Ben Eliezer had met on Wednesday with "a Turkish official."

The talks sparked a major row between the Israeli foreign ministry and the office of Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister after Avigdor Lieberman said he first heard of the talks through the media.

Lieberman's office issued a statement saying such a move caused "serious harm" to relations with Netanyahu.

"The foreign minister views as extremely serious the fact that this was done without notifying the foreign ministry. This goes against all norms of government and does serious harm to the trust between the foreign minister and the prime minister."

Netanyahu's office promptly issued a statement saying the fact that Lieberman had not been informed was a "technical" oversight.

Wednesday's "secret" meeting was the first on a ministerial level since relations between Israel and Turkey plunged on May 31 when Israeli commandos raided a Turkish ship that was leading a flotilla carrying humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip.

Eight Turks and a dual US-Turkish citizen were killed in the operation, which shattered bilateral ties already strained since Israel's war on Gaza last year.

Diplomatic strain

Immediately after the raid, Turkey recalled its ambassador from Israel and cancelled three planned joint military exercises. It also twice denied permission to Israeli military aircraft to use its air space.

Turkish officials have said Turkey expects Israel to apologise for the bloodshed, compensate the victims' families, agree to an international inquiry and release three Turkish vessels seized in the operation.

Turkey also wants Israel's 2003 blockade of Gaza to be lifted.

Israel, which strictly controls Gaza's borders in what it says is a precaution against arms smuggling, has defended the actions of marines who boarded the ship, arguing they opened fire after being attacked with knives and clubs.

But following Western criticism, including from its largest ally the United States, Israel has eased a land blockade of Gaza where 1.5 million Palestinians live, allowing more civilian goods through, while continuing to enforce a naval embargo of the coastal territory.

On Monday Israel launched a commission of inquiry into the Gaza aid flotilla raid, though the panel's make-up and limited powers have been criticised by Turkey.