**Iran Red Crescent to send aid ships**

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**AFP**

The Iranian Red Crescent says it will send three aid ships to Gaza in the latest bid to break the blockade imposed on the Palestinian territory by Iran's arch foe Israel.

It will also send a plane carrying 30 tonnes of medical equipment to Egypt for onward delivery to Gaza.

Red Crescent director for international affairs Abdolrauf Adibzadeh told Iranian media that two ships would leave for Gaza this week, followed at a later date by a third vessel.

The first two ships will head to Gaza in coordination with the Turkish government.

Of the two ships, "one will carry 70 aid workers such as nurses and medics and the other will have foodstuffs and medicines," Adibzadeh was quoted as saying on the state television website.

"The (two) ships will be sent to Gaza by end of this week," Adibzadeh told the state IRNA news agency.

The news agency said the third vessel would be equipped with an onboard operating theatre and would head for the Palestinian territory at a later date.

Adibzadeh said the Red Crescent has called for Iranian volunteers to act as relief workers and accompany the first two vessels.

"Volunteers who want to go to Gaza and help the oppressed people of occupied Palestine can refer to the Red Crescent website and register," he said.

He said an aid plane would "leave in a short time for Egypt in coordination with the Egyptian Red Crescent".

The Iranian Red Crescent had previously sent an aid ship carrying food and medicines to Gaza in December 2008 but it was prevented from reaching the territory by the Israeli navy.

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said such aid ships were symbols of the "protest movement against the blockade".

"If this symbolic campaign continues, it will result in the surrender of the Zionist regime, which will certainly be one of its biggest defeats," the state television website quoted him as saying.

The decision to send new aid to Gaza comes hot on the heels of a report that Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards had expressed readiness to escort aid flotillas to Gaza.

"If the respected leader of the revolution (supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) gives an order in this regard, the Revolutionary Guards' naval forces will take a practical step using their capability and equipment to escort flotillas to Gaza," Khamenei's aide in the Guards' naval wing, Ali Shirazi, told the Mehr news agency on Sunday.

It was unclear, however, how the Guards would escort the flotillas as their naval wing is largely made up of speedboats and light vessels.

Last week's Israeli commando raid on an aid flotilla headed for Gaza, in which nine pro-Palestinian activists died, has sparked outrage across the political spectrum in Iran.

Blaming the United States, Britain and France for the deadly raid, Khamenei called for the prosecution of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Ehud Barak.

In a message issued on Tuesday, Iran's supreme leader called on the international community to end the Israeli blockade.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad too lashed out at Israel, demanding that it face "political sanctions" for the raid.

The animosity between Iran and its regional archfoe has only worsened under Ahmadinejad, with top Guards commanders repeatedly boasting that the elite force has missiles capable of reaching any target in Israel.

In turn, Israel, which has the Middle East's sole if undeclared nuclear arsenal, has refused to rule out a resort to military action against Iran to prevent it acquiring a nuclear weapons capability.

Iran denies any such ambition.