



18 killed as explosion rocks Indian wedding

Britain wants degree fees to reflect choice of subject

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GAZA: Palestinian relatives mourn over the bodies of Salam Sabah (left) and Abdullah Abu Sheikha, both 17, during their funeral, in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday. Two Palestinians were killed by Israeli fire, Gaza medical sources said, after four soldiers were wounded in an apparent bomb attack on the border with the Palestinian enclave. —AFP

Israel kills 2 Palestinians; soldiers hurt

Israel forces attack 18 'terror targets'

GAZA: Israeli forces shot dead two Palestinian teenagers in the Gaza Strip, medical sources said yesterday, as tensions rose after an apparent bomb attack that wounded several Israeli soldiers on the enclave's border. The Saturday explosion and ensuing Israeli air strikes marked one of the most serious escalations in the Hamas-ruled territory since the Islamist movement and Israel fought a war in 2014. Israel's army said it attacked "18 terror targets belonging to the Hamas terror organisation" in two waves of air strikes.

"Eight targets were attacked in a military compound near Deir el Balah, which belongs to the Hamas terror organisation, including weapon-manufacturing and training infrastructures," it said in a statement. Earlier the army said fighter jets had targeted "six military targets in Gaza belonging to Hamas, including: a terror tunnel in the Zaytun area and military compounds near Deir el-Balah and Khan Yunis". Two Palestinians were injured in air strikes which hit three bases belonging to Hamas in the east of the blockaded Gaza enclave, Palestinian sources said.

Speaking at a security conference in Munich late Saturday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had called the border blast "very serious" and pledged to "respond appropriately". According to witnesses, the two dead Palestinians were shot by Israeli forces near the border on Saturday. They were identified by the Gaza health ministry as Salam Sabah and Abdullah Abu Sheikha, both 17, who were killed east of Rafah in the south of the enclave. They were to be buried later. The Israeli army said that its

forces had fired "warning shots" at a number of Palestinians approaching the border fence "in a suspicious manner".

'Rogue group'

Four Israeli soldiers were wounded, two severely, when an improvised explosive device blew up along the Gaza border fence, but none of their lives were in danger, the army said. A hospital spokeswoman later said that the condition of one of those seriously wounded had improved. Spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Conricus said a "rogue group" had claimed responsibility for the bomb blast, likely indicating one of the more radical Islamist groups who are present in Gaza.

But he insisted that "from our point of view Hamas is responsible" and said the explosive had been planted during a protest arranged by the group on Friday. According to Conricus, Israeli soldiers saw a flag on a pole on the Gazan side of the border fence, with the device exploding when one of them grabbed it. According to Palestinian security sources, the explosion took place east

of the city of Khan Yunis.

In response Israeli forces said a tank promptly opened fire at an "observation post" in southern Gaza, causing no injuries on the Palestinian side. A projectile launched from the Gaza Strip hit near a home in a southern Israeli community, damaging a building but causing no injuries, Israeli authorities said. Israel holds the Islamist Palestinian movement Hamas responsible for any fire from the blockaded coastal enclave.

The Israeli army responds automatically to any strikes on its territory, generally targeting Hamas facilities. Hamas's armed wing, the Ezzedine Al-Qassam Brigades, said it had fired at Israeli jets overhead. Conricus denied the claim.

Hamas and Israel have fought three wars since 2008, and the last conflict in 2014 was waged in part over tunnels from Gaza that were used to launch attacks. Israel hit Hamas targets in the southern Gaza Strip repeatedly in early February, saying Palestinians there had fired a rocket into its territory. Tensions between the Palestinians and Israel have been high since US President Donald Trump

recognised Jerusalem as the capital of the Jewish state in December. Netanyahu will visit the White House next month, a senior US administration official told AFP on Friday. The March 5 visit comes as Netanyahu faces a scandal that has seen police recommend he be indicted for graft.

Planning attack

Meanwhile, Israel arrested six Palestinians suspected of planning attacks targeting Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman and other Israelis in the occupied West Bank, security agency Shin Bet said yesterday. Shin Bet said the six were affiliated with the Islamic Jihad militant group and were active in the Bethlehem area where they sought to carry out shootings against Israeli civilians and security forces. In addition, some of the group had been planning to target Lieberman's vehicle when he travelled to his home in a West Bank settlement.

According to a Shin Bet statement, the suspects had been "trying to obtain explosives to make a bomb, and even reached out to terror elements in (Gaza) for funding." "Upon failing to acquire the materials, they decided to create a fake device to receive recognition for their action and enable further attacks," the statement read. The six will be charged in an Israeli military court later. In 2014, Shin Bet said it had apprehended a Hamas group planning to assassinate then-foreign minister Lieberman by firing a rocket-propelled grenade at his convoy. —Agencies



Israel arrests 6 Palestinians plotting attack

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Nigeria frees another 475 Boko Haram suspects

ABUJA: Nigeria has freed another 475 Boko Haram suspects following a series of mass trials in which most cases were dropped for lack of evidence, the justice ministry said yesterday. Over the course of the week, hundreds of suspected Boko Haram extremists have appeared before a court at the Kainji military base in central Niger state. The release order was issued on Friday, with the 475 suspects to be returned to their home states for "proper rehabilitation" before being sent back to their families, ministry spokesman Salihu Othman Isah said.

He said they had been arrested on grounds they either belonged to Boko Haram, or had concealed information about the group's plans or its members' whereabouts. "However, the Prosecution Counsel could not charge them with any offence due to lack of sufficient evidence against them. Therefore, the suspects were released." Among those released was a young girl with a three-month-old baby from Borno State who was taken to a Boko Haram enclave by her brother and married off to his friend when she was 11. She was arrested in 2014 while trying to escape.

Also freed were two mechanics, identical twins who were arrested in Bauchi State in 2010 after servicing a vehicle at their workshop which belonged to a Boko Haram member. Also Friday, the court imposed a second 15-year sentence on Haruna Yahaya, 35, who was involved in the 2014 kidnapping of more than 200 schoolgirls from Chibok. Earlier in the week, he had been jailed for 15 years but the court handed him an additional 15-year term, with the judge saying the two sentences would run consecutively.

Years without trial

In total, some 1,669 people have been processed in a string of mass hearings which began in October at four specially-constituted civilian courts inside the facility. Most were men, but their number also included some women and children, with Nigeria widely criticised for holding them and thousands of others for years without trial or even contact with a lawyer. Before Friday's release of 475 suspects, 468 had been freed after it was found they had no case to answer; 45 were jailed for between two and 15 years and 28 had their cases transferred to other jurisdictions.

A further 82 pleaded guilty in exchange for a lesser sentence or release, taking into account time served in custody. And others were freed after spending years behind bars. The remaining cases have been delayed for another hearing. Boko Haram's bloody quest since 2009 to establish a hardline Islamic state in remote northeast Nigeria has left at least 20,000 dead and forced more than 2.6 million others out of their homes. The violence has also spilled over into neighbouring Cameroon, Chad and Niger. —AFP

Deadliest plane crashes in Iran since 2003

TEHRAN: An Iranian passenger plane on a domestic flight crashed yesterday into the country's Zagros mountains, with all 66 people on board feared dead. Here is a recap of the deadliest plane crashes in Iran since 2003.

2014

On August 10, an Antonov An-140 run by Sepahan Airlines carrying 40 passengers and eight crew crashed moments after it took off from Tehran. Thirty-nine people were killed and nine others severely injured. The pilot narrowly missed buildings and a busy market before crashing into a concrete wall. Iranian authorities said the cause of the accident was engine failure and faulty alarm signal.

2011

On January 9, an Iran Air Boeing 727 shattered on impact while attempting an emergency landing in a snowstorm in the country's northwest, killing 77 people and injuring 27. The aircraft had taken off from Tehran with more than an hour's delay due to bad weather and two previous flights had already been cancelled.

2009

On July 15, a Tupolev 154 jetliner operated by Caspian Airlines en route from Tehran to Yerevan in Armenia caught fire shortly after takeoff and crashed into a field in the northern region of Qazvin, killing all 168



DUBAI: In this file photo, a French-made ATR-72 owned by Iran's Aseman Airlines sits on the tarmac at Dubai airport. All 66 people on board an Iranian passenger plane were killed yesterday after it crashed into the country's Zagros mountains, with emergency services struggling to locate the wreckage in blizzard conditions. —AFP

passengers on board including 15 crew. Authorities said a technical problem was the cause of the crash.

2006

On November 26, an Iranian military plane crashed in Tehran, killing 39 people of which 30 were members of the Revolutionary Guard—the Islamic regime's ideological army. The plane had been destined for Shiraz in the south but crashed on takeoff at Tehran's Mehrabad airport. In January the same year eight senior officers of the ground forces of the Revolutionary Guard and three crew members were killed when a military plane crashed in the northwest of the country. On September 1, 29 people were killed when a Tupolev 154 crashed and burst into flames in Mashhad in the northeast after a tire blew up. The aircraft run by Iran Airtours skidded off the runway and crashed into fencing.

2005

On December 6, a military transport craft Lockheed C130 crashed at the foot of a 10-storey apartment building in a residential area of southern Tehran, killing 108 people including 68 journalists and photographers, and injuring more than 90. Among the victims, 14 people were killed on the ground. The plane had experienced engine trouble just after takeoff from Mehrabad.

2003

On February 19, an Ilyushin Il-76 belonging to the air army of the elite Revolutionary Guard crashed near Kerman in the southeast, killing all 275 people on board. The craft had disappeared from radar monitors an hour after takeoff from Zahedan Airport and following contact from the pilot to airport control in Kerman to warn them he wanted to land due to bad weather. —AFP