

International

Israel pounds Gaza after first rocket fire in weeks

A blow to efforts to avert a new war

GAZA: Israeli warplanes pounded the Gaza Strip yesterday after the first rocket fire from the Palestinian territory in weeks hit an Israeli city, in a blow to efforts to avert a new war. Gaza's Islamist rulers Hamas disavowed the rocket fire saying they rejected "all irresponsible attempts" to undermine Egyptian efforts to broker a new long-term truce. But Israel, which holds Hamas responsible for all rocket fire from the territory regardless of who launches it, struck 20 targets in Gaza, killing one Palestinian, according to the Hamas-run health ministry.

Israel also closed both its border crossings with Gaza in reprisal, further isolating the blockaded enclave where deteriorating living conditions have stoked violent protests along the border. Gaza militants fired two rockets before dawn, one of which caused major damage to a family home in the southern city of Beersheba, 40 kilometers (25 miles) away, the Israeli army said.

The family of three children narrowly escaped injury after their mother moved them into the safe room, with much of the rest of the house destroyed, the army said. "At 4 am (0100 GMT), Israelis in the city of Beersheba were running to bomb shelters after a rocket was launched from the Gaza Strip at Israel," the army tweeted. "We will defend Israeli civilians," it added. The other rocket came down in the sea off Tel Aviv, 70 kilometers (45 miles) from Gaza, the army said.

'Full responsibility'

The Islamists and allied militant group condemned the latest rocket fire as "irresponsible". But Israeli military spokesman Jonathan Conricus rejected the disavowal, saying Hamas bore "full responsibility" as Gaza's de facto ruler. He said retaliatory strikes had hit 20 targets, including a Hamas attack tunnel and an "advanced weapons manufacturing site." One Palestinian the army said was preparing a rocket launch was killed in northern Gaza. At least three other Palestinians were wounded in the strikes, the Gaza health ministry said.

Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman ordered the closure of both of Israel's border crossings with Gaza in reprisal, making the heavily restricted Rafah crossing with Egypt the enclave's sole gateway to the outside

world. Lieberman also ordered the reduction of the permitted fishing zone off the Gaza coast to three nautical miles, the defense ministry body responsible for Palestinian civil affairs, COGAT, said. Lieberman already suspended deliveries of fuel that had been trucked daily into Gaza under a deal brokered by the United Nations. It had seen thousands of liters (gallons) of fuel paid for by Qatar delivered to generate desperately needed power in the impoverished territory.

'Dangerous escalation'

Hamas has fought three wars with Israel since 2008 and fears of a fourth have spurred efforts by Egypt and the United Nations for a wider deal that would see Israel ease its blockade in exchange for a long-term truce with the Islamists. During a meeting with Israeli President Reuven Rivlin yesterday, UN envoy Nickolay Mladenov called the latest rocket launches a "dangerous escalation."

"Unfortunately, they fit a pattern of provocations that seek to bring Israel and Gaza into another deadly conflict and confrontation," he said, pledging to work with all sides to avert one. Rivlin said there could be no easing of the blockade while Israelis remained under threat of rocket attack. "So long as the missiles and the provocation continue on, there is no chance of easing the suffering of the people of Gaza," he said. Rivlin praised the fast reaction of Israelis in Beersheba, saying the mother's actions saved her family's lives. The United Nations says Israel's 11-year blockade has resulted in a "catastrophic" humanitarian situation in Gaza.

Its two million residents endure routine power cuts and a chronic shortage of safe drinking water, and more than two-thirds are dependent on international aid. The latest flare-up comes after months of Palestinian protests along the Gaza border that have drawn a deadly response from Israeli troops. The protesters have been demanding an end to Israel's blockade and the right of return to land now inside Israel, from which their families were expelled or fled during the 1948 war that accompanied its creation. At least 207 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire since the protests began on March 30. One Israeli soldier has been killed by Palestinian sniper fire over the same period. — AFP

Israel closes border crossings in reprisal



GAZA: Mourners carry the body of Palestinian Najj Al-Za'aneen, 25, during his funeral procession in the northern Gaza Strip yesterday. The Israeli army said Za'aneen was preparing a rocket launch when he was killed in a retaliatory air strike. — AFP

Guantanamo to stay open at least 25 years

GUANTANAMO BAY NAVAL BASE: Former president Barack Obama had vowed to close the US military-run prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, but now it will stay open for at least 25 years, the officer in charge of the facility said Tuesday. Rear Admiral John Ring said the prison, which holds several alleged plotters of the 9/11 attacks, is focused on readiness to make "sure that the facilities are going to last for 25 years." In January, President Donald Trump signed an executive order, reversing his predecessor Obama's ultimately fruitless

2009 directive to shutter the facility that has drawn global scorn.

Following Trump's move, "they told us we are going to be here for 25 years or more," said Ring, Commander of Joint Task Force Guantanamo. The Pentagon "sent us a memo saying plan to be open" for at least 25 years, Ring said during a visit regularly organized by the US military for journalists, with the aim of showing that prisoners are treated humanely at the American enclave in communist Cuba's southeast. In December, the top torture expert at the United Nations said reports from sources indicated at least one inmate was still being tortured at Guantanamo Bay. Nils Melzer, the UN special rapporteur on torture, said he had received information that torture through noise and vibrations was taking place against Ammar Al-Baluchi, a suspected 9/11 plotter. — AFP

Gaza: Months of deadly tensions

GAZA: Gaza has since late March been the scene of massive protests and clashes between Palestinians and Israeli soldiers along the border with Israel. At least 207 Palestinians have since been killed by the Israeli army and one Israeli soldier has been shot dead. Here is a recap of the violence around the Gaza Strip:

First deadly day

Major protests begin on March 30, 2018, to demand the right to return to homes, now inside Israel, that some 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from in 1948 when Israel was created. Tens of thousands of Palestinians, including many women and children, converge along the border barrier that separates Gaza from Israel. Officially organized by civil society groups, "The Great March of Return" is backed by Islamist movement Hamas, which runs Israeli-blockaded Gaza. Several groups face off with Israeli soldiers, throwing stones and Molotov cocktails. Israeli snipers respond with live fire, killing 19 Palestinians. On March 31, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu praises troops for "guarding the country's borders".

Kites on fire

On April 6, thousands of Palestinians gather again near the security barrier. Nine Palestinians are killed and nearly 500 injured. The confrontation continues over the coming days, with new deaths on the Palestinian side. The Palestinians employ a new tactic, sending kites across the border, some carrying explosive devices. The kites have since torched thousands of hectares of Israeli territory.

Bloodbath

On May 14, tens of thousands of Palestinians return to the barrier as the US opens its controversial embassy in Jerusalem after Washington recognized the disputed holy city as Israel's capital. At least 62 Palestinians are killed by Israeli fire in the ensuing violence and more than 2,400 wounded. A top Hamas official says most of those killed are its members. On May 29, Israel's air force strikes dozens of targets in Gaza in response to a barrage of mortar and rocket fire. The armed wings of Hamas and allied militant group Islamic Jihad claim joint responsibility for fire from Gaza.

United Nations

On June 1, the US vetoes a draft resolution at the UN Security Council calling for the protection of Palestinians in Gaza and the occupied West Bank. Four more Palestinians are killed and 100 injured, including an AFP photographer at the scene, as new demonstrations turn into clashes on June 8. On June 13, the UN General Assembly adopts a resolution, opposed by Washington, condemning Israel for the violence, rejecting an American amendment implicating Hamas.

Summer of violence

On July 14, Israel unleashes dozens of air strikes, killing two Palestinians, while 200 rockets target Israel. Six days later an Israeli soldier becomes the first to be killed in and around Gaza since 2014. Overnight August 8-9, Hamas fires some 180 rockets and mortars from Gaza, according to the Israeli army, which says its response targets 150 of the movement's military sites, leaving three Palestinians dead including a pregnant woman and her toddler. — AFP

US sanctions key Iran paramilitary

WASHINGTON: The US Treasury Department has slapped sanctions on an Iranian paramilitary group along with a network of businesses that were providing it financing, as part of Washington's campaign of maximum economic pressure against Tehran. In announcing the sanctions, the Treasury said a network of more than 20 businesses known as the Bonyad Taavon Basij was financing the Basij Resistance Force, a component of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

It also accused the hardline militia of sending child soldiers to Syria in support of President Bashar al-Assad's regime. "The international community must understand that business entanglements with the Bonyad Taavon Basij network and IRGC front companies have real world humanitarian consequences," said Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin. "This helps fuel the Iranian regime's violent ambitions across the Middle East."

The Basij, a paramilitary force formed soon after the 1979 revolution, is one of the Iranian regime's primary enforcers of internal security with branches in every province and city of Iran, according to the US Treasury. "In addition to its involvement in violent crackdowns and serious human rights abuses in Iran, the Basij recruits and trains fighters... including Iranian children, who then deploy to Syria to support the brutal Assad regime," it said. It added that in addition to Iranians, the militia recruited Afghan immigrants to Iran through coercion, some of whom had fled to Europe as a result, as well as Pakistani nationals.

"Children recruited by Basij have tragically fought and died on the battleground in Syria," a senior administration official told AFP. The Bonyad Taavon Basij is said to provide the Basij militia social welfare services, including housing and financial support, and manages economic activities by funding small companies. "Bonyad Taavon Basij has expanded its reach into Iran's economy by establishing several investment firms through its financial and investment offshoot Mehr Eqtasad Bank," the Treasury statement said.

Among the other companies singled out was Iran Tractor Manufacturing Company (ITMC), the largest tractor manufacturer in the Middle East and North Africa that predates the Iranian revolution. It generates millions of dollars in profit for the investment firms that represent the Basij. Also targeted was Iran's Zinc Mines Development Company, described as the country's "pre-eminent, multibillion-dollar zinc and lead mining and processing holding company." "What we've designated here today is a multibillion-dollar network that has had significant (links) in Europe and the Middle East," said a second senior administration official. — AFP



TEHRAN: Turkmen Basij militiamen march during an annual military parade which marks Iran's eight-year war with Iraq, in this file photo. — AFP



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