

Israel hits back after Palestinian militants launch barrage of rockets

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USPA News - The Israeli military responded with artillery fire and dozens of airstrikes on late Wednesday evening after Palestinian militants launched a barrage of 60 rockets at southern Israel, injuring at least one person on the Israeli side in one of the region's worst outbreaks of violence in recent years, officials said. A spokesperson for Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said 60 rockets hit southern Israel on Wednesday, including eight that hit urban areas, including Sderot, Shaar Hanegev Regional Council, and the areas around Netivot, Sdot Negev and Eshkol Regional Councils.

One person suffered minor injuries. The rocket attack forced scores of people in southern Israel to seek shelter. Only three of the rockets fired during Wednesday's attack were intercepted by the IDF's Iron Dome Missile Defense system, which uses sophisticated radar to track, intercept and destroy incoming missiles. A spokesman for the Al-Quds Brigades, the armed wing of Islamic Jihad, claimed responsibility for the rocket attacks, saying the operation was called 'Breaking the Silence' and a response to alleged Israeli killings of unarmed civilians in Gaza, the Palestinian Ma'an news agency reported. Israel initially responded to Wednesday's attack by launching artillery fire at two "terror locations" in the northern and southern Gaza Strip, but it was later followed by a series of airstrikes by Israeli Air Force aircraft on 29 additional sites. There were no immediate reports of serious damage or casualties from the Palestinian side. "This retaliation was precise and prompt. We targeted the infrastructure that serves the terrorists while they train, plan and implement their hideous attacks," said IDF spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Peter Lerner. "They will not be permitted to conspire in the safety of their terrorist temples." The IDF acknowledged Islamic Jihad was behind Wednesday's attack, but said it considers Hamas responsible for all attacks emanating from the Gaza Strip. "We will continue to strike those who want to harm us. We'll act against them very forcefully," said Ofir Gendelman, a spokesman for Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. "We will continue to work to ensure the safety and security of Israeli citizens who live in the south and all over Israel." Israeli President Shimon Peres, in a diplomatic working meeting with British Prime Minister David Cameron, also addressed the situation. "It's a very severe attack. Over 50 missiles were fired against a civilian population. The people in Gaza have to choose: it's either peace or violence," Peres said. "We cannot behave as though nothing happened and I'm sure the government will take the necessary steps to stop it." He continued: "Hamas must understand that you can't have it both ways, we shall not accept Gaza as a center of terror, we cannot permit it. It's not just a matter of wounded or killed; it's a million and a half people who won't have security or a night's sleep. We'd clearly like to have peace but we must stop the terror. We're not interested in raising the flames but we decided to stop the fire." United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon condemned Wednesday's attacks on Israel, describing it as a "severe escalation" of violence. "[Ban] urges all actors to exercise maximum restraint to prevent further incidents that could bring greater escalation and destabilization in the region," his spokesman said. Also on Wednesday, Peres spoke about instituting 'a state of peace' between Israel and militants in the Gaza Strip in an effort to end the long history of fighting in the region. "All of us, Arabs and Jews, we have a real option either to make a peaceful Middle East or to break the region. There are times when you don't have a choice but now we do and we made our choice, our choice is peace based on compromise, a two state solution," Peres said. "We must implement it, we cannot postpone. Time is running out, decisions will be taken in the next few weeks. We have to act with energy and understand that a mistake will cost a terrible price." Cameron, during the meeting, lent his support concerning Israel's offer of a peaceful two state solution. "This is a time of real opportunity, an opportunity to have a two state solution and to make that work for the people of Israel and for the Palestinians," he said. "I think now is the moment when we need the leaders of Israel and the leaders of the Palestinian people to take bold steps and some risks to deliver that two state solution and you'll have the strongest possible support from Britain, from Europe and from all friends of Israel in taking those steps." Militant rocket attacks on Israel and Israeli airstrikes on Gaza occur frequently, but Wednesday's barrage of rockets represented the largest attack on Israel since Operation Pillar of Defense in 2012. Militants in Gaza have fired more than 80 rockets at Israel since the start of 2014, according to figures released by the IDF. On March 3, the Israeli military carried out an airstrike in the northern Gaza Strip, killing at least two Palestinian militants and injuring two others who they believed had been preparing to launch a rocket across the border. And in late December, a 22-year-old Israeli man was killed by a Gazan sniper while carrying out maintenance along the Israel-Gaza border fence, prompting a series of Israeli airstrikes across the Gaza Strip that resulted in the death of a Palestinian toddler, making it the region's worst day of violence in months. The violence on December 24 marked the first killing of an Israeli civilian in the vicinity of the Gaza Strip since November 2012, when an Israeli offensive set off eight days of fierce cross-border fighting. At least 174 Palestinians and 6 Israelis were killed while hundreds more were injured until an Egyptian-brokered truce was reached with Palestinian militants.

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