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9 dead in IDF raid on Gaza

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Nine Palestinians were killed and 30 were wounded late on Monday night during a large IDF operation deep inside Gaza City intended to destroy terrorist infrastructure.

Soldiers destroyed 13 metal workshops used to manufacture Kassam rockets and other weapons and the home of the terrorist who killed five yeshiva students and wounded 20 at a pre-military training academy in Atzmona on March 7.

During the operation, which lasted several hours and was met with stiff resistance, IAF helicopters provided cover for infantry, tanks, and armored personnel carriers. The operation was one of the largest in the Gaza Strip since violence broke out two years ago, with soldiers penetrating a kilometer inside Gaza City.

Palestinian Authority negotiator Saeb Erekat said the operation was a "bloodbath" and called for international intervention.

"The international community should act to implement the UN Security Council resolution passed on Monday after this new Israeli bloodbath in Gaza," he said.

Other PA officials accused Israel of initiating the attack to divert attention from the siege on PA Chairman Yasser Arafat's Ramallah headquarters. "Sharon may want to turn attention away from the fact that he did not fulfill his promise to completely destroy the Mukata" unless those inside surrender, said Ziad Abu Amr, a Fatah legislator from Gaza.

Security officials said the operation did not mark the beginning of a major IDF operation against Hamas. However, they said it is only a matter of time before such an offensive, which Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and senior government officials support, is carried out.

On Monday, a senior security official said conditions in the Gaza Strip require proper preparation before such an operation. He said security officials also support expelling Hamas spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin.

"The IDF operations in the Gaza Strip on Monday night demonstrated to the Palestinians, especially to Hamas and Islamic Jihad which carry out most of the suicide attacks in our cities, that Israel will not stand by helplessly, and that even their commanders in Gaza are not invulnerable," Maj.-Gen. (res.) Oren Shachor, former coordinator of government activities in the territories, said.

"The latest operation was meant to prove to the Palestinians, particularly Hamas, that Israel knows out to carry out land operations deep within the strip, and fortunately without any soldiers being killed. In my opinion, this operation was the first in a series designed to reach Hamas leaders in the strip, including the capture and possible deportation of Sheikh Yassin and Abdel Aziz Rantissi."

Abu Amr said, "These were not Hamas targets, five of those killed were totally innocent civilians who were caught by helicopter gunship fire... one was a member of [Arafat's presidential guard] Force 17.

Palestinian hospital sources said six of the nine killed were civilians.

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Army Radio reported that senior members of Hamas's military wing were among the dead.

Security officials denied Palestinian reports that those killed were mainly civilians. Lt.-Col. Ron, who commands a battalion in the Givati Brigade, told The Jerusalem Post that none of the Palestinians killed by troops were innocent of wrongdoing.

"From the moment we entered and throughout the entire operation, we had to deal with bombs detonated against our troops on the routes, armed and daring terrorists who got close to the soldiers and opened fire, anti-tank fire, grenades, and armed Palestinians who shot from a distance," he said. "Those hit by us were not innocent civilians but were intent on harming us."

He stressed that utmost care was taken by all the soldiers, who were severely restricted throughout the mission in order to prevent civilians from being harmed.

"We expect Hamas to retaliate for the attack, feeling that the ground is ripe... they will tell people that they are revenging their blood," a Fatah member in Gaza said.

He said while Hamas will use the IDF operation in Gaza to justify additional attacks, the movement has never agreed to stop them, despite efforts by Fatah to convince its leadership to halt attacks on civilians. He said there is no one to talk to in Hamas.

When Fatah officials blamed Hamas for the siege around Arafat's compound and warned that they would hold Hamas responsible for anything that might happen to Arafat, Hamas leaders said they have no control over their members, a Fatah source said.

However, Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal told Reuters in Beirut yesterday that Hamas has no intention of ending attacks against civilians. He said Hamas would continue to carry out such attacks until the end of the occupation.

Those killed in the operation were identified as Yassin Nasser, 53, a Hamas member; Jaber al-Kharazi, 20, a member of the Aksa Martyrs Brigades; Muhammad Kishko, 45, the senior commander of the brigades in the area; Walid al-Mughni, 14, and his brother Ibad, 21; Nidal al-Sursuk, 27; Ashraf Zuwayed, 25; and Adel a-Ze'eb, 32, and his brother Khaled, 34. They were all buried yesterday, amid calls by Hamas for immediate revenge.

Tanks destroyed the home of Hamas terrorist Muhammad Farahat, who carried the attack in Atzmona on March 7. His mother made headlines after video footage showed her with her son, who boasted about the "mission" he was to carry out; she called on all mothers to encourage their sons to become "martyrs."

Palestinians reported that soldiers also blew up an agricultural store that belonged to Ahmed Muqat and damaged a garage and another shop nearby.

Elsewhere in the Gaza Strip, shots were fired at an IDF post near Gadid in Gush Katif.

Early yesterday morning, security forces arrested nine wanted terrorists, five in Beitunya, three south of Ramallah, and one in the Jenin refugee camp,

In the West Bank last night, shots were fired at a vehicle near Neveh Tzuf. Earlier, shots were fired and fire-bombs were thrown at border police in Tulkarm and Shuweika, north of the city.

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