Balloon-borne device from Gaza starts fire outside Sderot kindergarten

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A balloon-borne incendiary device launched from the Gaza Strip was suspected of having started a small fire Monday afternoon outside a kindergarten in the southern town of Sderot.

Firefighters were called to the scene and quickly put out the blaze in a plastic closet outside the school.

“No damage was caused to the kindergarten. The fire was outside the building. This was a small fire that was extinguished by one team,” a fire department spokesperson said.

Fire and Rescue Services investigators were working to confirm the cause of the fire, the spokesperson said.

Separately, police said a “suspicious item” affixed to a balloon was being neutralized in the southern town of Netivot, after apparently being flown across the border from Gaza.

Meanwhile, Egyptian mediators were expected in Gaza later Monday to try and calm tensions sparked by a week of incendiary balloon attacks that ignited wildfires in Israel and drew Israeli airstrikes in response.

Israel has targeted positions of Hamas, the terror group that runs the Palestinian territory, which it holds responsible for all cross-border attacks.

The latest tensions also led Israel to close its Kerem Shalom border crossing with Gaza and on Sunday tighten its naval blockade of the territory, restricting Gaza’s coastal fishing zone.

“The Egyptian security delegation will arrive in Gaza today, and will hold a meeting with the Hamas leadership and the leadership of the factions to discuss stopping Israeli aggression,” a Hamas source told AFP.

Israeli tanks pounded Hamas targets early Monday in what has become a daily response to Palestinian rocket and balloon-borne firebomb attacks, as well as clashes on the border.

Palestinian security sources in Gaza said that Monday’s tank fire hit Hamas lookout posts in Gaza City, Beit Hanoun in the north of the strip and in Khan Younis to the south.

They said there were no casualties.

“Tanks targeted a number of military observation posts belonging to the Hamas terror organization in the Gaza Strip,” an Israeli military statement confirmed in English.

The army said dozens of Palestinians had also “instigated riots along the Gaza Strip security fence” on Sunday evening.

A statement from Israeli fire services in the border areas reported 28 outdoor fires Sunday, and farmers said that extensive damage was caused to an avocado orchard.

The same statement said that since August 6, fire scene investigators had identified 149 blazes in southern Israel caused by incendiary balloons floating across from Gaza.

At least four additional fires were reported in the Eshkol region on Monday morning.

In a Palestinian protest on Saturday evening “rioters burned tires, hurled explosive devices and grenades towards the security fence and attempted to approach it,” an Israeli army statement said.

Despite a truce last year backed by the UN, Egypt and Qatar, the two sides clash sporadically after rockets, mortar fire or incendiary balloons are launched from Gaza at Israel.