IDF officer injured during Gaza protests

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An IDF officer was lightly injured Friday after an explosive device was thrown at him during violent clashes along the Gaza border, which saw some 11,000 Palestinians take part in the March of Return protests.

The border police officer was lightly wounded in his leg from shrapnel and was taken to the Barzilai Medical Center in Ashkelon.

The Health Ministry in Gaza said that at least 20 Palestinians were wounded by IDF troops, who fired live bullets and rubber-coated steel rounds at protesters. The IDF said the protesters had been hurling stones, explosive devices and grenades at troops stationed along the fence. Demonstrators also burned tires and launched incendiary balloons toward several locations.

The IDF also said soldiers arrested an unarmed Palestinian man who infiltrated into southern Israel from the northern Gaza Strip. He was taken by security forces for further questioning.

On Saturday, Palestinians reported that several youths breached the security fence in the central Gaza Strip near the al-Bureij refugee camp in an attempt to plant explosive devices. There were no reported injuries or casualties.

Also on Saturday, Palestinian Maan News reported that IDF forces opened fire toward Palestinian fishing boats off the coast of Beit Lahiya in the northern Gaza Strip. There were also no reported injuries.

Thousands of Gazans have been protesting along the security fence on a weekly basis taking part in March of Return demonstrations which began on March 30, calling for an end of the 12-year-long Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip.

Last month, a report by Doctors Without Borders found that a total of 6,174 Palestinians have been injured by live bullets fired by IDF troops over the past 10 months since the beginning of the riots.

According to Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem, 254 Palestinians have been killed in the Gaza Strip.

Last week, two teenagers were killed during protests at the fence. One teenager was identified as 14-year-old Hassan Shalabi, the son of a niece of Hamas political chief Ismail Haniyeh.

The IDF military intelligence assessment for 2019 has warned that a continued deterioration of Gaza’s civilian infrastructure will continue to put pressure on Hamas, which could lead to another violent clash with Israel, despite both sides not being interested in another war.

According to the assessment, while Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar has succeeded in alleviating certain conditions in the blockaded coastal enclave with the protests, including an expanded fishing zone and the opening of the Rafah crossing with Egypt for longer periods of time, he has still not been able to lift the blockade.

In order to do that and to bring in international involvement in the Gaza Strip, it is believed that Sinwar might consider having militants attack IDF troops along the border fence by sniper fire, anti-tank missiles, firing rockets at Israeli cities or attack troops through one of their cross-border attack tunnels.

Based on the assessment, IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Aviv Kochavi, who was sworn in last month as the military’s top officer, prioritized the southern front as one which could explode into war at any moment. He visited the Southern Command, met with senior officers and approved operational plans for war, including setting up a centralized administrative unit to prepare a list of potential targets in Gaza.

Kochavi also ordered an increase of two Iron Dome anti-missile batteries, which would see Israel have a total of 10 Iron Dome batteries, eight manned by conscript soldiers and two by reservists.