2 women killed by rockets in Ashkelon amid massive barrages from Gaza

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Two women were killed and dozens injured, including two seriously, when Palestinian terror groups in the Gaza Strip fired massive barrages of rockets at southern Israel throughout Tuesday, drawing deadly retaliatory airstrikes from the Israel Defense Forces.

The deaths marked the first fatalities in Israel in the round of fighting with Gaza terrorist groups that began Monday evening, which has seen hundreds of rockets fired at Israeli territory.

The Hamas terror group claimed that at one stage on Tuesday it fired 137 rockets in around five minutes in an apparent attempt to overwhelm the Iron Dome missile defense system.

In a subsequent barrage on the southern coastal city of Ashkelon, less than an hour later, two women were killed by rockets in apparently separate hits. There were no immediate details on their identities.

Channel 12 reported that a deadly rocket attack directly struck a home where an elderly woman and her caregiver, who did not manage to get to a public shelter in time, lived. One of the women was killed, the network said, without identifying the victim.

The network reported that the shelter is at least a minute’s run away from the woman’s home. The home did not have a safe room of its own.

Medics told the Kan public broadcaster that one of the women killed by rocket fire in Ashkelon was Israeli and the other victim was a foreign worker.

The Barzilai Medical Center in Ashkelon said that it treated 74 casualties, including two seriously wounded and two in moderate condition. Forty-nine people received treatment for light injuries, with the remainder suffering from anxiety.

With a number of buildings in the city suffering direct hits over the course of the day, and concerns over the number of residential buildings without bomb shelters, the Israel Defense Forces instructed residents to remain in reinforced areas. The restriction was later lifted — followed, minutes later, by additional rocket alert sirens on the city.

Ashkelon Mayor Tomer Glam said some 25 percent of residents don’t have access to a protected area when rockets are fired at the city.

“It is impossible when normal life becomes a state of emergency within minutes,” he told Army Radio. “There are houses from the 1960s where there is no basic protection — it is time for treasury officials and decision-makers to understand what is happening here in the city.”

Hundreds of rockets were fired at Israel from Monday evening through Tuesday afternoon, many of which were intercepted by Iron Dome missile defense batteries while others fell short of their targets and landed inside the Strip.

Tuesday afternoon saw the rocket attacks shift slightly northward, with projectiles fired at Ashdod including a rocket that directly hit a residential building. Buildings were also hit in Ashkelon, including an empty school.

On Monday night, a rocket directly struck a house in the Sha’ar Hanegev region, damaging it but not injuring its occupants.

In the early hours of Tuesday, a missile hit a residential building in Ashkelon, wounding six Israelis, four of them members of the same family: parents in their 40s, an 8-year-old and an 11-year-old. The father was seriously hurt with a head wound, and the others  sustained light injuries from shrapnel.

The assaults continued Tuesday after a night of almost constant rocket fire on Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip and as the IDF conducted strikes on more than 100 targets in the coastal enclave, as part of what it has called “Operation Guardian of the Walls,” the military said. The previous day saw a major outbreak of violence from Gaza, including rare rocket fire on Jerusalem, where Palestinians have been clashing with police for days.

In response to the ongoing rocket rockets, IDF fighter jets, aircraft and tanks struck some 130 targets in the Gaza Strip, most of them associated with Hamas, but also some linked to other terror groups in the enclave, including the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad terror groups reported that several high-ranking commanders were killed in Israeli raids, including three top PIJ leaders in a drone strike on a building in the upscale Rimal neighborhood of Gaza City.

One of those killed was the brother of another top PIJ commander, Baha Abu al-Ata, who was killed in an Israeli strike in November 2019, kicking off a major round of fighting in the Strip. Islamic Jihad vowed revenge for the death of the three commanders in its armed wing, saying the response will be “harsh.”

Additionally, the IDF said it killed the head of Islamic Jihad’s special rocket unit, in an operation carried out in cooperation with the Shin Bet. Sameh Abed al-Mamluk was killed along with several other senior rocket officials, the army said.

According to the IDF, the military’s targets also included the home of a top Hamas commander, Hamas’s intelligence headquarters in southern Gaza, two attack tunnels that approached the border with Israel, rocket production and storage sites, observation posts, military installations and launchpads.

The IDF said it was also targeting terrorist operatives as they fired rockets or attempted to launch anti-tank missiles at Israel. On Monday, an Israeli man was lightly injured when Palestinian terrorists fired an anti-tank guided missile at his car.

Palestinian media also reported strikes around the southern cities of Rafah and Khan Younis and on an apartment building in the al-Shati camp near Gaza city. A building was also destroyed in Gaza City’s upscale Tel al-Hawa neighborhood.

The Hamas Health Ministry said 28 Gazans were killed, including nine minors, and 125 wounded in the ongoing escalation with Israel. Fifteen Gazans sustained serious injuries, according to Hamas Health Ministry spokesperson Ashraf al-Qidra. Israel said more than half were Hamas fighters.

IDF Spokesperson Hidai Zilberman said a number of those killed in Gaza, including at least three children, were hit by errant rockets fired by Palestinian terrorists, not by Israeli airstrikes.

The IDF spokesperson said Israel was taking steps to avoid Palestinian civilian casualties, but that they were liable to occur anyway as Hamas deliberately operates within a densely populated area, using the residents of the Strip as human shields.

Israel on Tuesday showed no indications that it was interested in an immediate ceasefire, as Zilberman said the fighting was expected to last at least several days.

IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kohavi on Tuesday afternoon gave the military a green light to keep targeting Hamas and PIJ members operating in the Strip and bombing sites connected to the terror groups’ rocket production and storage efforts.

Soldiers from the IDF’s Golani Infantry Brigade and 7th Armored Brigade were sent to the Gaza border as reinforcements and additional troops were called in to aerial defense, intelligence and air force units, the military said. The police said that eight reserve companies of Border Police would be called up to help deal with disturbances across the country.

Zilberman said the military was deploying additional air defenses throughout the country, notably in the Tel Aviv metropolitan area. Tel Aviv had yet to be targeted as of Tuesday afternoon, but the IDF suspected that rocket fire may be directed there as well.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz said the IDF would continue striking Hamas and other terrorists in the Strip until “long-term and complete quiet” is restored. Gantz also threatened Hamas’s leadership, saying its commanders would “be held responsible and pay the price for the aggression.”

In light of the ongoing rocket attacks, Gantz declared the area within 80 kilometers (50 miles) of the Gaza Strip to be under military control, giving the IDF the power to issue directives to civilians there. The IDF ordered schools closed in communities near Gaza on Tuesday and limited gatherings to groups of 10 people outdoors and 50 people indoors. Businesses would be allowed to open only if they had easy access to bomb shelters.

The military also limited gatherings in the Tel Aviv metropolitan area and the Shfela region around Beit Shemesh to 30 people outdoors and 50 people indoors. Schools and businesses there could also only be opened if they had easy access to a bomb shelter. A number of cities in central Israel announced they were preemptively canceling schools on Tuesday as a precautionary measure.

Meanwhile, the Hamas-run Health Ministry in Gaza said that the Strip’s sole power plant was running low on diesel fuel after Israel closed all of its crossings on Monday evening in response to the hundreds of rockets fired.

The coastal enclave normally receives most of its fuel through the Kerem Shalom commercial crossing with Israel, and according to the Gaza Electrical Company, one of the plant’s generators has already been turned off and the plant as a whole will likely shut down “soon” due to lack of fuel, threatening to severely restrict the number of hours of electricity Gazans receive.

Al-Qidra said that an electrical shortage would threaten the effectiveness of Gaza’s health care system.

“This will have a serious effect on public health and the health of our society,” al-Qidra said.

Hamas, which is officially dedicated to the destruction of the State of Israel, took effective control of the Gaza Strip in 2007 from the Palestinian Authority in a violent coup. Since then, Israel has imposed a naval blockade on the enclave, as well as stiff control over what can enter the Strip, maintaining that it is necessary in order to prevent terror groups from smuggling weapons into the area.

The military initially believed that Hamas was not interested in a large-scale conflict with Israel at this time, but that assessment changed over the past two days and the IDF began preparing accordingly.

Palestinian terror groups have tied the attacks to the unrest in Jerusalem connected to both prayer on the Temple Mount during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and the pending eviction of a number of Palestinian families from their homes in East Jerusalem’s Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood.

Israel has fought three large operations against Hamas and other terror groups in the Gaza Strip since 2008, most recently in 2014 with a 51-day war known as Operation Protective Edge.