Israel strikes targets in Gaza after incendiary balloons spark 28 fires

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By TOI STAFF and Aaron Boxerman

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Israeli warplanes, tanks and drones attacked Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip before dawn on Monday in response to repeated arson balloon attacks launched into Israel, the army said.

The Israel Defense Forces said it attacked “military posts and underground infrastructure of the Hamas terror group in southern Gaza.”

It said the strikes came in response to the launching of explosive-laden balloons into Israel on Sunday.

Two suspected explosive devices were found Sunday in southern Israel after apparently being flown into Israeli territory from the Gaza Strip, as balloon attacks continued throughout the day, according to officials from the Eshkol Regional Council.

“One device was found next to a playground and a second was found in a tree. In both cases, a police sapper was called. No damage or injuries were caused,” an Eshkol spokesperson said.

Throughout the day, dozens of balloons carrying explosives and incendiary devices were launched into southern Israel, causing at least 28 fires, officials said.

According to Fire and Rescue Services, fires were reported in the areas of Sha’ar Hanegev, Eshkol, Hof Ashkelon and Sderot. The fire department said most of the fires were relatively small and did not represent a threat to nearby communities.

Due to the continued launching of explosive and incendiary devices, a security source said Israeli authorities were preventing vehicle imports from passing through the Erez Crossing with Gaza.

“Following the continued violation of security stability, and following the decision to close the Kerem Shalom Commercial Crossing with the exception of humanitarian equipment, it will be noted that the import of vehicles, which has so far been carried out through the Erez Crossing, was stopped as well starting today,” the source told The Times of Israel.

The move follows Israel’s gradual closure of the Kerem Shalom commercial crossing to all materials except for humanitarian aid and its banning Palestinian fishermen from using a demarcated fishing zone, as part of efforts to pressure Hamas to crack down on the balloon launchers.

Over the past few weeks, Palestinians in Gaza have again begun launching balloon-borne incendiary and explosive devices into southern Israel, sparking dozens of fires that caused environmental and property damage in the region. Rockets have also been fired on multiple occasions at Israeli cities and towns, including over a dozen projectiles overnight Thursday. Those attacks have drawn daily retaliatory Israeli strikes against Hamas installations.

A ceasefire that has been in place for years, ans has already been renewed several times, is bolstered by millions of dollars in financial aid from Qatar to Gaza. But complaints from Hamas that Israel has failed to live up to its side of the bargain have been accompanied by sporadic flareups on the border.

The Qatari envoy to Gaza, Mohammed al-Emadi, is expected to visit the Strip this week for the first time since February to deliver a cash payment to Gaza residents.

The money has continued to arrive regularly despite al-Emadi not being present himself over the last six months. However, Israel has threatened not to allow him in if the incendiary balloons and rocket attacks persist.

Hamas is under immense international pressure — from Qatar, Egypt and UN envoy Nickolay Mladenov — to halt its attacks, alongside pressure from the Gazan public, which is getting only three-four hours of electricity per day after becoming used to more than three times that amount, after Israel ended fuel imports in response to the violence.

But analysts say Hamas believes Israel is not interested in a round of violence at this time, leading the group to toughen its demands.

According to a report Saturday night, Hamas’s entire leadership in Gaza has gone underground in anticipation of possible targeted killings by Israel.

The targeted killing of a Palestinian leader in Gaza is a rare event, but both Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Benny Gantz have hinted at a possible return to the policy, with Gantz warning on Thursday that the IDF was able to hit human targets as well as buildings and terror infrastructure.

Gaza terror groups have warned Israel against reinstating its policy of targeted killings, saying it would be met with a large and coordinated response, including thousands of missiles fired at Tel Aviv, a Lebanese newspaper reported on Saturday.