2 balloon-borne bombs from Gaza explode in Israeli border towns; no injuries

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Two explosive devices borne by clusters of balloons from the Gaza Strip detonated inside communities in southern Israel on Tuesday, as Egyptian mediators visited the restive enclave in a bid to calm increasingly violent tensions between Israel and the Gaza-ruling Hamas terror group.

On Tuesday afternoon, the first device exploded in an agricultural field in the Eshkol region.

“According to farmers, there was a blast, but it did not cause harm to people or property,” the local regional council said in a statement.

Hours later, a second device was flown into Israeli territory from the Gaza Strip, landing inside a community in the Sha’ar Hanegev region, the local government said.

“The device attached to the cluster of balloons exploded in an open area. There were no injuries or damage to property,” a Sha’ar Hanegev spokesperson said.

Recent weeks have seen a dramatic increase in the level of violence along the Gaza border, with near nightly riots and a return of airborne arson attacks, which had waned in light of a de facto ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas at the end of last year.

On Tuesday evening, two Palestinians were wounded by Israeli fire during one such riot along the Gaza security fence, east of the Bureij refugee camp, the Hamas-run health ministry said.

In these nightly demonstrations, led by so-called “confusion units,” participants generally set off loud explosives, burn tires and throw rocks at Israeli troops on the other side of the security fence. The Israeli soldiers typically respond with tear gas and, in some cases, live fire.

Palestinians in the Strip have also returned to regularly launching balloons carrying explosive devices into southern Israel, with the Israeli military often retaliating by targeting observation posts controlled by the Hamas terror group.

There were no immediate reports of such retaliatory measures on Tuesday evening.

On Monday, Israel Defense Forces attack helicopters struck two Hamas positions in southern Gaza in response to a balloon-borne explosive device from the Palestinian enclave that landed in Israel hours earlier, the army said.

It was Israel’s fourth retaliatory airstrike against the terror group in the three days.

It came after the bunch of balloons carrying explosives came down between two buildings in the Eshkol Regional Council, the council said in a statement. The bomb exploded but caused neither injuries nor damage.

In an ongoing effort to calm tensions between Israel and Hamas, a senior Egyptian delegation visited both the Jewish state and the Strip this week.

In Gaza, the Egyptian mediators, mostly from the country’s military intelligence, met with Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh on Tuesday. They entered the Strip through the Erez Crossing from Israel, according to Palestinian media.

Last Thursday, Cairo returned four Hamas members held in Egypt since August 2015 to the Gaza Strip, where they were welcomed by Haniyeh.

The four had disappeared in August 2015 under mysterious circumstances as they traveled through the Sinai region on a bus from Gaza to Cairo en route to Turkey.

Haniyeh did not say Thursday who had been holding the four Gazans but expressed his “deep gratitude to the Egyptian authorities for this decision.”

After halting their activities for several months, the Palestinian “confusion units” recently returned to the Gaza border, holding riots at various locations along the security fence each night in an effort to maintain pressure on Israel by tormenting civilians living nearby and troops serving on the border.

The border riots are part of the March of Return protests, which have taken place weekly along the border since last March and have periodically escalated into major flare-ups between the Israeli military and Gaza-based terror groups.

Israel has accused Hamas of orchestrating the clashes and using them as cover to breach the border fence and carry out attacks. Palestinians maintain that the protests, which call for the right of Palestinians displaced in the 1948 Independence War to return to their homes and for an end to the Israeli-Egyptian blockade on the enclave, are generally peaceful and are not led by the terror group.

The latest riots came after the release last week of a report commissioned by the UN Human Rights Council on Israel’s handling of the clashes that alleged there is evidence Israeli soldiers committed crimes again humanity.

The inquiry investigated possible violations from the start of the protests on March 30, 2018, through December 31.

Israeli leaders angrily rejected the findings of the UN probe, calling it “hostile, deceitful and biased.”