Gazans launch dozens of fire balloons into Israel as hundreds riot on border

June 14, 2019

Times of Israel

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/gazans-launch-dozens-of-fire-balloons-into-israel-as-palestinians-riot-on-border/>

Palestinians rioting on the Gaza border Friday launched dozens of arson balloons into Israel, setting off at least 7 fires near border communities amid soaring tensions following two nights of rocket attacks and retaliatory air force strikes.

Several thousand Palestinians gathered along the border for weekly protests with several hundred taking part in violent riots. Rioters threw explosive devices and rocks at troops and also tried to storm the fence in one place.

Three Palestinians briefly breached the fence in one spot before returning to Gaza, Israel Radio reported.

Troops responded with tear gas and live fire in some cases. The Hamas-run Gaza health ministry said 46 people were wounded.

The balloons sparked at least 7 blazes, including two large ones near Kibbutz Nahal Oz and Kibbutz Kfar Aza. Another fire raged in the Be’eri nature reserve. Firefighting teams and local residents were managed to extinguish them.

Border protests were not held last week due to the holiday of Eid al-Fitr, but resumed Friday, with an estimated 6,500 Palestinians taking part.

Since the last major eruption of violence in early May, Hamas has largely acted to contain violent activities at the rallies, but it was not clear whether the terror group intended to continue this policy.

Israeli Air Force jets carried out multiple airstrikes in the Strip early Friday, hours after a rocket hit a religious school in southern Israel. The Israeli military said in a statement that fighter jets and other aircraft attacked “several terror targets, including terror infrastructure in military compounds.”

The strikes came hours after a rocket launched from Gaza slammed into a building housing a religious school, causing damage but no injuries. The rocket, which did not explode, struck the outer face of the yeshiva, sending debris onto the sidewalk. A number of tempered-glass windows were also broken. Most students had gone home for the weekend, but several people were still inside the school at the time.

In light of the increased tensions, the Israel Defense Forces on Friday increased the deployment of its Iron Dome missile defense batteries in southern Israel.

On early Thursday morning, a rocket launched from Gaza at the southern community of Nirim was intercepted by the Iron Dome anti-missile system.

The rocket attacks led to growing calls among politicians for a major military operation, including assassinating leaders of Hamas.

No Palestinian group has taken responsibility for the attacks, but the military generally holds Hamas responsible for any violence emanating from the enclave.

Tensions with Gaza have been steadily rising in recent days, with Israel blocking Gazan fishermen from access to the sea in response to multiple incendiary balloons being launched over the border.

Hamas has complained that Israel is not fully implementing an unofficial ceasefire deal between the sides, while Jerusalem has accused Palestinian terror groups of breaching the understandings.

UN Middle East envoy Nickolay Mladenov met with Hamas leadership in Gaza on Friday in a bid to prevent an escalation of violence.

The tensions have threatened to undo an unofficial ceasefire brokered after a major flareup in early May in which both sides exchanged the most intense fire in years, leading to the deaths of four Israelis and 29 Gazans.

According to Israel’s Channel 12 news, last month’s agreement includes a Hamas obligation to halt violent incidents along the border fence, maintaining a buffer zone 300 meters from the border; an end to the launching of incendiary balloons at Israeli communities and nighttime clashes between Gazans and security forces; and an end to flotillas trying to break through the maritime border between Gaza and Israel.

In return, Israel expanded the fishing zone and agreed to enable United Nations cash-for-work programs, allow medicine and other civil aid to enter the Strip, and open negotiations on matters relating to electricity, crossings, healthcare and funds.

“The situation will gradually escalate” if the deal is violated, an unnamed Hamas official was quoted as saying by the Kan public broadcaster Thursday. “If the agreement is implemented, the situation will calm down.”

“We are not trying to undermine what we have achieved, but groups in Gaza aren’t feeling like Israel has been honoring the agreement,” the official added.

“It is only delaying and delaying and doesn’t want to carry out the understandings regarding getting the [Qatari] money into Gaza, expanding the fishing zone and allowing dual-purpose materials into the Strip.”

Al-Akhbar, a Lebanese newspaper linked to Hezbollah, reported Friday that mediators from the UN, Egypt and Qatar have conveyed assurances to Gaza factions that Israel intends to implement the ceasefire’s understandings. It did not provide sourcing and its claims couldn’t be independently confirmed.