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Palestinians hit by sonic boom air raids

- UN condemns night noise attacks as indiscriminate
- Agencies say they cause trauma and miscarriages

Chris McGreal in Gaza
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[The Guardian](#)

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Israel is deploying a terrifying new tactic against Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip by letting loose deafening "sound bombs" that cause widespread fear, induce miscarriages and traumatise children.

The removal of Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip opened the way for the military to use air force jets to create dozens of sonic booms by breaking the sound barrier at low altitude, sending shockwaves across the territory, often at night. Palestinians liken the sound to an earthquake or huge bomb. They describe the effect as being hit by a wall of air that is painful on the ears, sometimes causing nosebleeds and "leaving you shaking inside".

The Palestinian health ministry says the sonic booms have led to miscarriages and heart problems. The United Nations has demanded an end to the tactic, saying it causes panic attacks in children. The shockwaves have also damaged buildings by cracking walls and smashing thousands of windows.

"I have never heard such a loud explosion. I thought it was right over the top of my building," said the owner, Tareq Dayyeh. "Sometimes you hear the rockets the Israelis fire but this was different. I felt like I was in the middle of a bomb. When I ran out the door I thought I might find the rest of the street was gone."

Over the past week, Israeli jets created 28 sonic booms by flying at high speed and low altitude over the Gaza Strip, sometimes as little as an hour apart through the night. During five days in late September, the air force caused 29 sonic booms.

A senior Israeli army intelligence source, who the military would not permit to be named, said the tactic is intended to break civilian support for armed Palestinian groups. "We are trying to send a message in a way that doesn't harm people. We want to encourage the Palestinian public to do something about the terror situation," he said. "What are the alternatives? We are not like the terrorists who shoot civilians. We are cautious. We make sure nobody is really hurt."

Yesterday, two medical human rights groups asked the Tel Aviv high court to outlaw the use of sound bombs on the grounds it amounts to illegal collective punishment and is detrimental to health.

"The stress is phenomenal," said Eyad El Sarraj, a psychologist and director of Gaza Community Mental Health Programme, one of the groups filing the petition. "The Israelis do it after midnight and then every one or two hours. You try to go to sleep and then there's another one. When it happens night after night you become exhausted. You get a heightened sense of alert, waiting continuously for it to happen. People suffer hypertension, fatigue, sleeplessness.

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"For children, the loud noise means danger. Adults may know it's only a sound but small children feel threatened. They are crying and clinging to their parents. Afterwards they are dazed and fearful, waiting for something to happen."

The UN Palestinian refugee agency said a majority of the patients seen at its clinics as a result of the sonic booms were under 16 and suffering from symptoms such as anxiety attacks, bedwetting, muscle spasms, temporary loss of hearing and breathing difficulties.

Although the Israelis say the shockwaves do not cause casualties, doctors at Gaza's Shifa hospital said the overflights had forced women to miscarry. The number of miscarriages had increased by 40%, according to Jumaa Saqqa, a surgeon and hospital spokesman. "There were no other symptoms and the rise happened after the sonic booms. We can see no other explanation. The number of patients admitted to the cardiac care unit doubled. Some of them proved to have suffered serious harm."

Dr Saqqa said one overflight occurred while he was operating. The Palestinian health ministry estimates the sonic booms have caused at least 20 miscarriages.

The UN's Middle East envoy, Alvaro de Soto, wrote to the Israeli high command this week saying he was "deeply concerned at the impact on children, particularly infants, of the use of sonic booms".

Mr de Soto said he did not accept that the tactic was a legitimate response to Islamic Jihad and Hamas firing rockets into Israeli towns. "Sonic booms are an indiscriminate instrument, the use of which punishes the population collectively. We ask therefore that their use be stopped without delay," the letter said.

The military was forced to apologise after one sonic boom was unintentionally heard hundreds of kilometres inside Israel last week. Maariv newspaper described it as sounding "like a heavy bombardment. The noise that shook the Israeli skies was frightening. Thousands of citizens leapt in panic from their beds, and many of them placed worried calls to the police and the fire department. The Tel Aviv and central district police switchboards crashed."

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