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The Times

June 10, 2006

Babies die as artillery barrage hits families on picnic beach

FROM STEPHEN FARRELL IN JERUSALEM

ISRAELI artillery fire killed a Palestinian family who were picnicking on the beach in Gaza yesterday, as the shoreline was packed with people on a Muslim holiday.

Body parts, bloodstained baby carriages and shredded holiday tents were left strewn on the sand near Beit Lahiya, in northern Gaza, after the late- afternoon strike that killed at least seven people, thought to include the parents and children of one family.

The Israeli military immediately expressed regret for the civilian deaths and ordered a halt to all artillery, naval and other shellfire into the sealed-off Strip.

The armed wing of the Islamist group Hamas responded by threatening to renew attacks on Israel, a move that would end the truce it declared last year. "The earthquake in the Zionist towns will start again and the aggressors will have no choice but to prepare their coffins or their luggage," the Hamas militants declared.

However, visiting the hospital where the injured were taken from Soudania beach, Ismail Haniya, the Palestinian Prime Minister and senior Hamas leader, made no such threat, though he denounced the incident as a war crime.

The Israeli military confirmed that its gunboats stationed off the 45km (28-mile) coastal strip had fired "towards" sites where Palestinian militants launch Qassam rockets into Israel, but they insisted that naval and aerial fire was not responsible and that its inquiry was instead focusing on land-based artillery batteries that fire daily from north and east of



Children were among the casualties after an Israeli artillery shell landed on Soudania beach. Israeli officials expressed regret (HATEM MOUSSA/AP)

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Gaza.

"We regret any harm caused to innocent civilians," an Israeli Defence Forces spokesman said. "We are offering the Palestinians any help that we can, including providing assistance to reach Israeli hospitals."

Palestinian television carried reports showing children with wounds to their heads, necks and torsos as body parts lay scattered around the beach.

In harrowing scenes one distraught Palestinian girl was filmed among the bloodstained debris, screaming: "Father, father." One man wept as he held the limp body of what appeared to be a girl or young woman, shouting: "Muslims, look at this."

Palestinian medical officials said that the dead included three children, aged 1, 2 and 4, two teenagers, aged 15 and 17, and an adult man and woman, most thought to be members of the Ghalia family.

Ali Ghalia had taken his two wives and nine children on the trip. "This was his first day at the beach this summer. He was taking his kids to play," the man's sister-in-law, Nasreen Ghalia, said.

Ali Ghalia, 45, was killed. One of his two wives and three of his children were among the dead. Bassem Naim, the Palestinian Health Minister, said that 30 other people were wounded.

Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian President, reacted angrily, calling the killings in- excusable and declaring three days of mourning.

"Men, women, children and elderly people are being massacred in front of the world's eyes," he said. "We call upon the world to intervene immediately to stop all these aggressions."

It is believed that the Israelis were targeting militants who launched rockets into the Jewish state in revenge for Israel's killing of Jamal Abu Samadhana, a senior militant figure, in an airstrike the night before.

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