

Two dead in Gaza shelling

by Sakher Abu el-Oun in Gaza City
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AN Israeli air raid on the Gaza Strip killed two Palestinian militants overnight as the Jewish state showed no let-up in its pounding of the territory that has seen 22 people killed in barely 48 hours.

Two militants were also wounded when the Israeli drone fired missiles at a vehicle in the Zeitun neighbourhood of Gaza City, Palestinian security sources said.

All four were identified as members of the Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, an armed offshoot of moderate Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas's Fatah faction.

An Israeli military spokeswoman said: "An air raid was launched by the army against a vehicle transporting terrorist activists in Gaza City."

Overnight, several dozen Israeli armoured vehicles and bulldozers, backed by aircraft, made a fresh incursion into the Gaza Strip, rolling two kilometres into the northern town of Beit Hanun, security sources and witnesses said.

The army closed off the southern entrance to the town, and blocked the main road linking the north and south of the territory, according to witnesses, who said Israeli soldiers had taken up positions on building tops across the town.

On Friday seven Palestinians were killed and 18 wounded in an Israeli air raid on a Gaza refugee camp.

At least six of those who died in the attack on the Jabalya refugee camp were members of the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of the governing Islamist Hamas movement.

Since the Israeli army was given the green light to intensify operations Thursday, 22 Palestinians have been killed in the Gaza Strip, according to Palestinian sources.

Defence Minister Amir Peretz ordered the army to "reinforce the offensive" after three Israelis were slightly wounded by rocket fire Friday on the southern town of Sderot, Mr Peretz's home town close to the Gaza border, public radio reported.

More than 1000 makeshift rockets have been fired from Gaza at Sderot, a town of 24,000 inhabitants in the Negev desert, since the September 2000 outbreak of the Palestinian uprising, killing five people and wounding dozens.

An army spokeswoman said the military had been responding overnight to the firing of anti-tank rockets from the Jabalya area and had hit "a certain number of terrorists".

She added that a house "that hid a tunnel used for arms smuggling" had been destroyed in an air raid in the southern town of Rafah, on the border with Egypt.

The Hamas-led Palestinian government issued a statement denouncing the "odious crimes perpetrated against civilians," which it said showed the intention of Israel to ratchet up its offensive.

It appealed to the world community to "intervene to put an end to these crimes".

Israel launched a massive offensive against Gaza on June 28, barely nine months after pulling all troops and settlers out of the territory.

The offensive followed a deadly cross-border raid by Gaza-based militants, including some from Hamas, in which an Israeli soldier was captured.

Nearly 250 Palestinians have been killed in the three and a half months since then.

The latest deaths brought to 5,436 the number of people killed - most of them Palestinians - since the intifada resumed in 2000.

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