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Deaths as Israel expands air assaults on Gaza

Eight Palestinians are killed, as Israeli warplanes hit Hamas government compounds, tunnels and power transformers.

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Israeli air strikes have killed at least eight Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, medics said, with Palestinian security sources confirming that at least three of them were Hamas fighters.

The Israeli army, meanwhile, said on Saturday that four soldiers were injured by a rocket fired from Gaza.

Palestinian medics said 39 Palestinians have been killed and 345 wounded since Israel launched the aerial campaign on the Palestinian enclave on Wednesday.

In the same period, three Israelis have been killed and 13 injured, including 10 soldiers.

Israel on Saturday expanded its fierce air assault on rocket operations in the Gaza Strip, striking Hamas government and security compounds, tunnels and electricity transformers after an unprecedented rocket attack aimed at the holy city of Jerusalem raised the stakes in its violent confrontation with armed Palestinians.

Israeli aircraft also kept pounding their initial targets, weapons-storage facilities and underground rocket-launching sites.

Tunisian Foreign Minister Rafik Abdesslem visited the Gaza Strip on Saturday and denounced Israeli attacks on the Palestinian enclave as unacceptable and against international law.

"Israel should understand that many things have changed and that lots of water has run in the Arab river," Abdesslem said as he surveyed the office of Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh reduced to rubble in an overnight air strike.

"[Israel] should realise it no longer has a free hand. It does not have total immunity and is not above international law," he added. "What Israel is doing is not legitimate and is not acceptable at all."

Ground troops

The Israeli military called up thousands of reservists and massed troops, tanks and armoured vehicles along the border with Gaza, signaling a ground invasion of the densely populated seaside strip could be imminent.

Since the start of its operation, Israel's army said it carried out some 700 airstrikes. It also said that fighters have fired more than 580 rockets over the border, 367 of which hit southern Israel, and 222 of which were intercepted by the Iron Dome anti-missile system.

The Gaza Interior Ministry said a government compound was also hit as devout Muslims streamed to the area for early morning prayers. So, too, was a Cabinet building where the Hamas prime minister received the prime minister of Egypt on Friday.

In southern Gaza, Israeli aircraft went after the hundreds of underground tunnels used to smuggle in weapons and other contraband from Egypt, people in the area reported.

A huge explosion in the area sent buildings shuddering in the Egyptian city of El-Arish, 45 kilometres away, an Associate Press news agency correspondent there reported.

New capabilities

The tunnels have also been a lifeline for residents of the area during the recent fighting, providing a conduit for food, fuel and other goods after supplies stopped coming in from Israel days before the military operation began.

Missiles also knocked out five electricity transformers, plunging more than 400,000 people into darkness, according to the Gaza electricity distribution company.

The widened scope of targets brings the two sides closer to the kind of all-out war they waged four years ago.

Hamas was badly bruised during that confrontation, but has since restocked its arsenal with more and better weapons, and has been under pressure from smaller, more fighters to prove its commitment to armed struggle against Israel.

The attack aimed at Jerusalem on Friday and strikes on the Tel Aviv area twice this week dramatically showcased the fighters' new capabilities, including a locally made rocket that appears to have taken Israeli defence officials by surprise.

Both areas had remained outside the gunmen's reach in past rounds of fighting, and their use dramatically escalated the hostilities.