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Israeli Warplanes Pound Gaza

Hundreds Killed in Reprisal Airstrikes Targeting Hamas Security Facilities

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JERUSALEM, Dec. 28 -- Israeli warplanes pounded Hamas installations across the Gaza Strip on Saturday and early Sunday in retaliation for rocket attacks from Gaza into [Israel](#). At least 225 Palestinians were killed and more than 400 wounded, Palestinian health officials reported, one of the highest daily death tolls in decades of conflict.

After the strikes, which created panic across the strip, filled hospitals with the injured and sent black clouds billowing into the sky, Palestinians launched dozens of rockets into southern Israel, killing a man in the town of Netivot and wounding at least four.

The violence followed the expiration of a cease-fire this month. The Israeli cabinet approved what was dubbed Operation Solid Lead in a meeting Wednesday. The assault occurred at a time of political uncertainty in Israel, with elections scheduled for February to choose a successor to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who is stepping down in the wake of corruption charges. Likud party leader Binyamin Netanyahu, who leads in recent polls, has accused the government, led by the Labor Party, and the centrist Kadima party, led by Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, of not doing enough to act against Hamas.

Defense Minister Ehud Barak, who leads Labor, said, "There is a time for calm and a time for fighting, and now the time has come to fight."

Hamas said when the cease-fire ended Dec. 19 that it wanted Israel to ease the cordon around the Gaza Strip, which had been imposed to put pressure on Hamas, an Islamist movement committed to Israel's destruction. Hamas said the humanitarian and economic costs of the embargo were deepening. But Israeli officials said Hamas had not kept its pledge to bring the rocket fire to a halt.

Over the past week, the number of rockets and mortar shells being fired into southern Israel increased dramatically, with more than 60 fired Wednesday and more than 80 Thursday. The rise has sown fear in Israeli towns, but there had been no fatalities among Israelis during the week until Saturday.

Israeli air force F-16 warplanes hit Hamas security installations, killing officials, policemen and bystanders, according to witnesses and officials in Gaza and Israel. Many people were reported still trapped under the rubble of collapsed buildings. Israel destroyed Hamas security structures in Gaza City, Khan Younis and Rafah, they said. The installations hit included a police academy, a coast guard facility and security services, including

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a jail holding opponents of Hamas.

One of those reportedly killed was Ismail Jumaah, a senior Hamas official and head of one of the local security forces.

On Sunday, Israeli bombs destroyed a mosque, Palestinian officials told the Associated Press. The military called the building a "base for terrorist activities."

The al-Aqsa television station used by Hamas was also struck, with its studio building destroyed. The station used a mobile unit to remain on the air.

Livni warned that Hamas's political leaders could soon be targeted. "Nobody is immune," the AP quoted her as saying.

The Israeli military said in a statement that "this operation will be continued, expanded and intensified as much as will be required." It was not clear whether the air attacks would be followed by a ground incursion in the seaside enclave, home to 1.5 million Palestinians, which has been ruled by Hamas for 18 months.

Olmert said: "The operation in Gaza is intended first and foremost to improve the security situation in the south of Israel in a fundamental way, and it might take time. It demands patience from each one of us, so we can complete the assignment. We want to return peace and quiet to the residents of the south."

Hamas officials in Gaza said its military wing would retaliate. "We will not leave our land, we will not raise white flags, and we will not kneel except before God," said Ismail Haniyeh, leader of the Hamas government in Gaza.

A leader of Hamas outside the strip, Khaled Meshal, who lives in exile in Damascus, Syria, called for a new Palestinian uprising. "I call on you to carry out a third intifada," he told al-Jazeera television, according to the AP. The first Palestinian uprising began in 1987 and a second in 2000.

Israel advised hundreds of thousands of people living within 19 miles of the Gaza border to remain in safe areas indoors in anticipation of further rocket attacks. The rocket firings from Gaza into Israel intensified in the past week after an Egyptian-brokered cease-fire expired Dec. 19. Hamas appeared to be firing longer-range rockets, compared with the relatively short-range Qassam projectiles launched earlier.

Barak said the Israeli operation may continue for some time. For weeks, he said, "Hamas and its proxies launched Qassam and Grad rockets, and mortars, on the towns of the south. We did not intend to let this reality continue."

He said the military had been preparing for the operation for several months "to strike Hamas severely so as to change the situation from its base." Barak added: "The operation will be deeper and expanded as much as needed. I do not want to delude anyone; it won't be short and it won't be easy, but we have to be determined."

Olmert said, "We tried to avoid, and I think quite successfully, to hit any uninvolved people -- we attacked only targets that are part of the Hamas organizations."

Reports from Gaza said numerous civilians were killed and wounded. Eyewitnesses said sick patients were being moved out of Gaza's Shifa Hospital to make room for incoming injured.

Records indicate there has been no similar single-day death toll since the first intifada broke out 21 years ago. In two years at the peak of the first intifada, 1988 and 1989, 289 and 285 Palestinians, respectively, were killed by Israeli security forces, according to the Israeli human rights group [B'Tselem](#). In the second uprising, which began in September 2000, 714 Palestinians were killed in the first year and 1,195 in the second, according to [Palestine Monitor](#).

The airstrikes came on a Saturday, when streets were filled in Gaza's main cities. On Friday, Israel had opened border crossings to allow trucks to carry supplies and food into the strip.

When the assault began about 11:30 a.m., a graduation ceremony was underway in Gaza City at the Hamas police academy. Witnesses said 47 uniformed recruits were lined up when two missiles struck. Ala Zumu, a 27-year-old cameraman for al-Arabiya television, was one of the first on the scene. "I walked in and I saw bodies on the floor of the courtyard, policemen in their blue uniform suffocating. There was a pile of some 50 of them, some breathing, moaning, and some silent," he said. "I saw body parts scattered, heads, arms and legs.

"Outside in the streets, I saw people running in hysteria, children crying. Every five minutes, there was a bombing. No one knew where to go. Children were leaving school. One woman whose son was one of the graduates was shouting, 'Where is my son?' " At Shifa Hospital, he added, "I saw bodies and wounded people lying on the floors, as there are not enough beds. Not only no beds, but also no medical supplies for the wounded. Bodies were on the floor because the morgue was full with bodies. So they piled one body on the other. It was an awful sight. It's the worst thing I have ever seen."

The attack was condemned by Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, which rules the West Bank. Yasser Abed Rabbo, the general secretary of the Palestine Liberation Organization, who is close to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, described the attacks in Gaza as "barbaric" and said the results were "catastrophic."

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said in a statement, "The United States . . . holds Hamas responsible for breaking the cease-fire and for the renewal of violence" in Gaza. She added, "The cease-fire must be restored immediately."

The United Nations and European Union called for a halt to the violence. The U.N. Security Council convened late Saturday at the request of Libya, the only Arab nation on the council, to discuss a Russian-drafted statement calling for a halt to Israeli military operations in Gaza and Palestinian rocket attacks upon Israel, diplomats told the Reuters news agency.

In Texas, where President Bush is vacationing, a White House spokesman urged Israel to avoid civilian casualties in airstrikes on Gaza but did not call for an end to the attacks. "Hamas's continued rocket attacks into Israel must cease if the violence is to stop," Gordon Johndroe said. "Hamas must end its terrorist activities if it wishes to play a role in the future of the Palestinian people. . . . The United States urges Israel to avoid civilian casualties as it targets Hamas in Gaza."

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contributed to this report.

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