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Egypt, UN push for Gaza Strip ceasefire

Israeli strikes have killed dozens of Palestinians, while Islamic Jihad has launched hundreds of rockets at Israel.

By Aaron Boxerman, Dov Lieber

The UN and Egypt are pressing Israel and militants in Gaza to agree on an immediate ceasefire as both sides exchanged fire for a second consecutive day, raising fears of a wider conflict that would deepen civilian woes in the blockaded Palestinian enclave.

Israel’s military carried out airstrikes again on Saturday targeting what it said were Palestinian Islamic Jihad members and sites across the Gaza Strip.

At least 24 Palestinians have been killed, including six children, among them a five-year-old girl and a senior militant commander, and wounded 204 others since the airstrikes began on Friday, the Gaza Health Ministry reported.

The Israeli army said it believed it had successfully killed a second Islamic Jihad commander in the southern Gaza Strip.

At the same time, Palestinian militants have launched hundreds of rockets at Israel’s south and centre, setting off air raid sirens and sending thousands of Israelis running to bomb shelters.

The violence showed little sign of easing on Saturday night, when a number of Palestinians, including “multiple” children, were killed by an explosion in the Jabaliya refugee camp north of Gaza City. The Israeli military said an errant Islamic Jihad rocket was responsible.

Israel’s advanced defence systems have intercepted most of the rockets that crossed into Israeli territory, although a rocket struck a house in the southern city of Sderot on Saturday, causing some damage. The bombardment in Gaza has been far more devastating, especially for civilians. Israel says it only targets militants.

Israel also closed its border crossing with Gaza when tensions rose last week. With no access to shipments of diesel fuel, Gaza’s sole power plant shut down on Saturday, meaning Gazans will only have about four hours of electricity in the summer heat.

“We have to be quick, because the humanitarian situation will deteriorate in hours, not days. And then the pressure on Hamas (to act) will start rising,” a diplomat familiar with the ceasefire talks said, referring to the militant group that controls Gaza. Islamic Jihad is seeking to “negotiate a way out of the situation”, he added, but noted the talks have yet to see a breakthrough.

Egypt, which shares a border with Israel and Gaza, often helps mediate peace between the two neighbours. It played a critical role in brokering a ceasefire after a deadly 11-day conflict between Israel and Hamas last year.

“Egypt is conducting intensive contacts around the clock to contain the situation in Gaza and work toward a ceasefire,” the Egyptian Foreign Ministry said on Friday night.

So far, the fighting has remained relatively limited compared with the May 2021 conflict, which claimed the lives of more than 250 people in Gaza and at least 12 in Israel. Thousands of buildings were damaged across the Gaza Strip and more than 100,000 Palestinians were displaced. But the Israeli military has called up 25,000 reserves and says it is ready for at least another week of combat against Islamic Jihad, whose officials also say a ceasefire isn’t imminent.

Tensions could expand to Jerusalem overnight on Sunday, with a coming Jewish holiday leading to an increase in Jewish visits to the Al Aqsa Mosque compound, a flashpoint site that is the holiest in Judaism and one of the holiest in Islam.

The latest round of fighting began on Friday after Israel launched an air campaign against Islamic Jihad in Gaza, describing it as pre-emptive following days of rising tensions with the Iran-backed militant group. Israel says Islamic Jihad was planning imminent attacks.

Tensions between Israel and the militant group rose last week after Israeli troops arrested an Islamic Jihad leader in the West Bank, where, Israel says, the group has been trying to plan attacks against Israel. Fearing revenge attacks, Israel shut down the border crossing with Gaza and restricted movement in Israeli towns near the blockaded enclave.

Security analysts said Hamas would have preferred to quietly continue benefiting from an Israeli move to reduce restrictions on commerce in the impoverished Gaza Strip, even as the militants rebuilt capabilities from last year’s devastating conflict. “It seems that interests are winning out over principles,” said Daoud Shehab, an Islamic Jihad official.

Israel can note several successes in its operation so far, having taken Islamic Jihad by surprise, assassinating a key commander and sustaining little damage from the militant group’s rockets, said Michael Milshtein, a former senior Israeli intelligence officer.

“But we don’t have any kind of long-term strategy for the day after. Everyone just “But we don’t have any kind of long-term strategy for the day after. Everyone just wants quiet,” Mr Milshtein said.

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