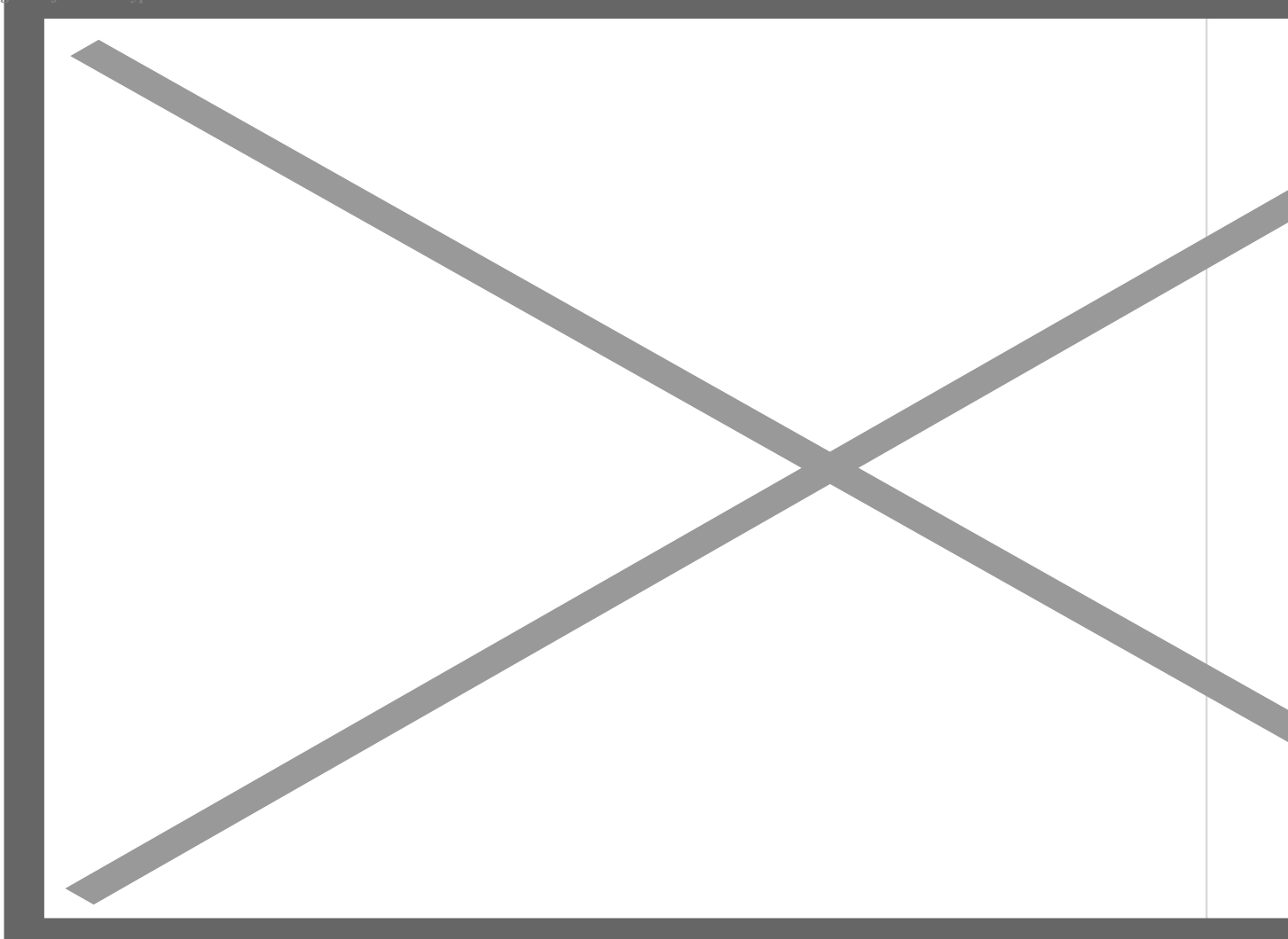


Eight Israeli soldiers killed in southern Gaza ambush; deadliest day in months

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Israel occupation troops on the ground in an unidentified location in the Gaza Strip [File: Israeli Army via AFP]?????

Rafah, June 15 (RHC)-- Hamas fighters killed eight Israeli soldiers traveling in military vehicles in Rafah after firing rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and then ambushing a support force deployed to the scene.

The attacks on Saturday marked one of the deadliest days for Israeli soldiers in Gaza in months as its ground invasion of the southern region continues to ramp up.

Qassam Brigades, Hamas's armed wing, said in a statement its soldiers "carried out a complex ambush against enemy vehicles" in the Saudi neighbourhood of Tal as-Sultan district, western Rafah city.

The armed group said it fired Yassin-105 RPGs at a D9 military bulldozer, killing and wounding an unidentified number of Israeli soldiers. A "rescue force" vehicle that later arrived was also attacked, "resulting in its destruction and the death of all its occupants".

Israel's army said in a statement the eight soldiers "fell during operational activity in southern Gaza", without elaborating. Daniel Hagari, Israeli's military spokesperson, said an investigation will be launched into how exactly the attack occurred.

"We're working to disarm all the fighters in order to prevent Hamas from targeting civilians again like on October 7. Today, we received another reminder of the high price we are paying because of this war, and we have soldiers ready to sacrifice their lives in order to defend Israel," Hagari said in a televised statement.

At least 307 Israeli troops have been killed and thousands wounded since October 27 when the ground invasion of Gaza was launched. At least 37,296 Palestinians – mostly women, children, and elderly – have died since the war began on October 7th, Gaza's health ministry says.

Saturday's casualties will likely fuel calls for a ceasefire and heighten Israeli public anger. In January, 21 Israeli troops were killed in a single attack by Palestinian fighters in central Gaza.

Despite international condemnation and censure, Israeli forces continue to push into and surround Rafah where at least 19 Palestinians were killed on Saturday. Hundreds of thousands of desperate civilians without food, water, and medicine remain trapped in the city.

Air, sea and artillery attacks on the Tal as-Sultan area intensified after the deadly Hamas ambush.

Mohamad Elmasry, a professor at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, said Saturday's attack shows Israel's stated war goal of destroying Hamas remains elusive after eight months of combat. "The Palestinian resistance fighters have put up quite a fight," he told Al Jazeera, noting a recent news report quoting U.S. intelligence officials saying about 70 percent of Hamas's fighting force remains intact.

"What's even worse, from an Israeli perspective, is Hamas has been able to recruit thousands of new members so there's no manpower issue for Hamas." Gideon Levy, an author and columnist with the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, said the deaths of eight soldiers is a "heavy price for Israeli society."

"More and more people in Israel are asking what for and until when? This might become an endless war – a war of attrition in which as strong as Israel's army is Hamas forces can always kill and sabotage, and then there will be direct retaliation. It leads nowhere. We'll never achieve this ridiculous 'total victory' that Prime Minister Netanyahu speaks about," Levy told Al Jazeera.

Despite growing international pressure for a ceasefire, an agreement to halt the fighting still appears distant. Since a weeklong truce in November that freed more than 100 Israelis, repeated attempts to arrange a ceasefire have failed with Hamas insisting on a permanent end to the war and full Israeli

withdrawal from Gaza. Netanyahu refuses to end the invasion before Hamas is “eradicated”.

More than 100 captives are believed to remain in Gaza, though many are believed to be dead. The armed wing of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, al-Quds Brigades, said on Saturday Israel could only regain its people if it ends the war and pulls out troops from the besieged enclave.

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