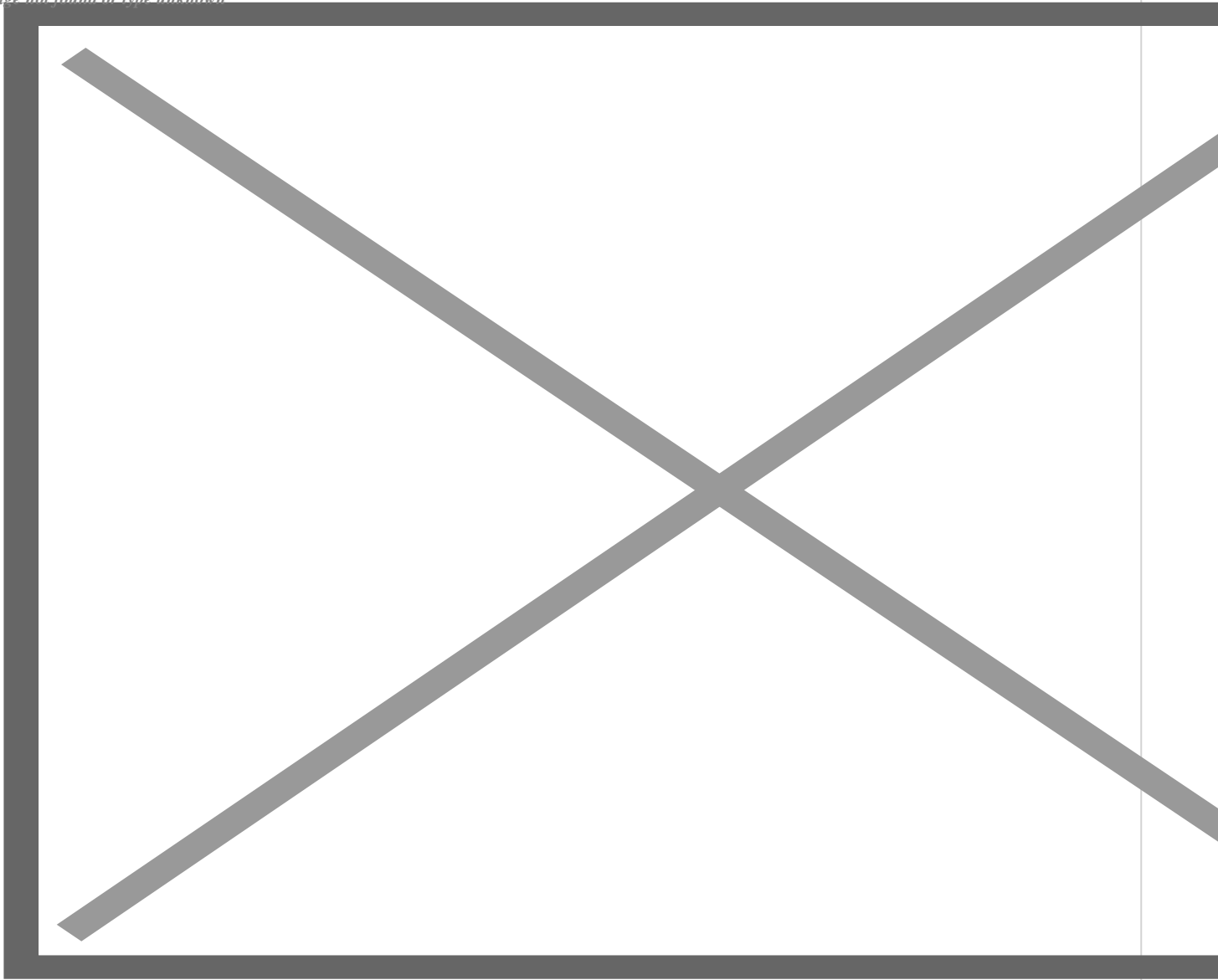


Israel launches air raids on Gaza Strip

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Explosions in Gaza City as Israeli forces attack the Palestinian enclave early on June 16
[Mahmud Hams/AFP]

Gaza City, June 16 (RHC)-- The Israeli air force launched air raids on the Gaza Strip early on Wednesday after Palestinians in the besieged enclave sent incendiary balloons into southern Israel, Israel's military and witnesses in Gaza said.

In a statement, the Israeli army said it attacked Hamas compounds and that it was "ready for all scenarios, including renewed fighting in the face of continued terrorist acts emanating from Gaza". It added that the raids were a response to the launching of the balloons, which the Israeli fire brigade reported caused 20 fires in open fields in communities near the Gaza border.

It was not immediately clear if there were casualties in Gaza as a result of the bombings.

Palestinian sources told the AFP news agency that the raids targeted at least one site east of the southern city of Khan Younes. A Hamas spokesman, confirming the Israeli attacks, told the Reuters news agency that Palestinians would continue to pursue their "brave resistance and defend their rights and sacred sites" in Jerusalem.

The air raids mark the first major flare-up between Israel and Gaza since a ceasefire on May 21st ended Israel's 11-day assault on the territory, which killed 256 Palestinians, including 66 children, according to Gaza authorities. Twelve people in Israel were also killed by rockets fired from the enclave.

They also are the first raids on Gaza since a new Israeli coalition government, headed by right-wing nationalist Naftali Bennett, took over during the weekend, ending Benjamin Netanyahu's 12-year run as prime minister.

The new government on Monday approved a "provocative" march by Israeli far-right nationalists and pro-settler groups through occupied East Jerusalem. Hundreds of Palestinians in Gaza protested against Tuesday's so-called "March of the Flags", which marks the anniversary of Israel's 1967 occupation of the city's eastern part.

The rally came as tensions remain high over Israel's planned forced displacement of Palestinian families from the neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah.

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