

Israel opens fires on protesting Palestinians in Gaza with live ammunition

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Palestinian protesters watch incoming tear gas canisters fired by Israeli forces following a demonstration near the border fence with Israel, east of Gaza City [Said Khatib/AFP]

Gaza City, August 22 (RHC)-- Israeli gunfire has wounded 26 Palestinians, including a 13-year-old boy who was shot in the head, health officials said, as protesters threw stones and burned tyres during a demonstration along the border fence with Israel.

Hamas, which rules Gaza, had called a protest on Saturday to mark the burning 52 years ago of Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque, the third-holiest site in Islam.

"Al-Aqsa Mosque is a red line, and any attack on it will be met with valiant resistance from our people," the movement said in a statement.

Al Jazeera's Youmna al-Sayed said the Palestinian factions called for a peaceful commemoration, as hundreds of Palestinians headed towards Malaka refugee camp – the biggest site for the 2018-19 Great March of Return protests east of the Gaza Strip.

Protesters threw rocks at the fence and Israelis fired live ammunition and tear gas canisters. At least 10 of the 26 injured are children, and two are in critical condition, al-Sayed said.

"Hamas called out the Israeli occupation forces' excessive force against unarmed civilians as a regular thing Israel is used to," she said. "And said the Palestinians will continue to send messages that they will not allow the Israeli forces to continue imposing the siege on the Gaza Strip and its people."

The protest came exactly three months since Israel and Hamas reached a truce following their deadliest fighting in years.

Over 11 days in May, Israel pounded Gaza with air attacks, killing at least 260 Palestinians, including 67 children. Rocket fire aimed at Israeli towns and cities by Palestinian armed groups in Gaza resulted in the death of 13 people in Israel, including a child.

Hamas said it took action after Israeli security forces violently stormed the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound several times, including on the holiest night of Ramadan. Reconstruction in Gaza has stalled since a May 21 ceasefire, in part because of a crippling blockade Israel has maintained on the enclave since Hamas seized power in 2007.

On Thursday, Israel announced it would allow funds from Qatar to reach impoverished Palestinians in Gaza. Other restrictions remain. In 2018, Palestinians began a protest movement demanding an end to Israel's blockade and a right for Palestinians to return to lands they fled after Israel was founded.

During the Hamas-backed weekly demonstrations, Israel killed some 350 Palestinians in Gaza over more than a year. The protests ended after mediators, including Egypt, Qatar and the United Nations, brokered an unofficial deal in which Israel eased some of its economic restrictions on Gaza and allowed Qatar to deliver tens of millions of dollars in monthly payments to needy Gaza families and Hamas salaries.

Since the May war, the new Israeli government, headed by Naftali Bennet, has blocked the Qatari aid, calling for a mechanism to ensure Hamas does not benefit from the cash. It has also blocked the import of key reconstruction materials while demanding that Hamas first return the remains of two soldiers killed in a 2014 war and two Israeli civilians believed to be alive.

Running out of patience, Hamas called for Saturday's protest to signal its frustration with Israel delaying the Qatari cash injections.

On Thursday, however, Israel announced an agreement with the Gulf Arab country to resume aid payments to thousands of families in the Gaza Strip, a step aimed at easing tensions with the Palestinian territory in the wake of the war.

Under the new arrangement, the funds are to be transferred by the UN directly to Gaza families, while giving Israel oversight over the list of recipients. The payments are expected to begin in the coming weeks.

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