

Israel hits key Hamas targets in Gaza strike

■ An Israeli leader says, 'We will have to take over Gaza temporarily.'

By DANIEL ESTRIN
Associated Press

JERUSALEM — Israel stepped up its offensive on the Hamas-run Gaza Strip on Wednesday, pummeling scores of targets and killing at least 22 people as Israeli leaders signaled a weeks-long ground invasion could be quickly approaching.

The military said it struck about 200 Hamas targets on the second day of its offensive, which it says is needed to end incessant rocket attacks out of Gaza. Militants, however, continued to fire rocket salvos deep into Israeli territory, and Israel mobilized thousands of forces along the Gaza border ahead of a possible ground operation.

"The army is ready for all possibilities," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said after holding a meeting of his Security Cabinet. "Hamas will pay a heavy price for firing toward Israeli citizens. The security of Israel's citizens comes first. The operation will expand and continue until the fire toward our towns stops and quiet returns."

The fighting stepped up as Egypt, which often serves as a mediator between Israel and the Palestinians, said it was in contact with both sides to end the violence. It was the first indication since the offensive was launched Tuesday that cease-fire efforts might be underway.

The offensive has set off the heaviest fighting between Israel and the Islamic militant group Hamas since an eight-day battle in November 2012. As the death toll continued to rise, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas



Associated Press photo by Hatem Moussa
Palestinians carry bodies of seven people killed in a strike during their funeral in Khan Younis refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip. Israel stepped up its offensive on the Hamas-run Gaza Strip on Wednesday, killing more than a dozen people.

accused Israel of committing "genocide."

Israeli leaders warned a ground invasion could be imminent.

"Despite the fact it will be hard, complicated and costly, we will have to take over Gaza temporarily, for a few weeks, to cut off the strengthening of this terror army," Yuval Steinitz, Israel's intelligence minister, told Israel Radio. "If you ask my humble opinion, a significant operation like this is approaching."

The government has authorized the army to activate up to 40,000 reservists for a ground operation. An Israeli government official, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was discussing Israeli tactical strategy, said the reservists would be sent to the West Bank to allow active duty troops to amass near the Gaza border.

Despite the tough threats, Israeli security officials are still hesitant about ordering a ground invasion due to the many risks. Entering Gaza could lead to heavy civilian casualties on the Palestinian side while putting Israeli ground forces in danger.

It remains unclear whether the international community would support such an operation, or how Israel would end it. Officials have little desire to retake control of Gaza, a densely populated territory of 1.8 million people from which Israel withdrew in 2005.

Since the offensive began Tuesday, Israel has attacked at least 560 sites in Gaza, the military said. Militants have fired more than 160 rockets at Israel, reaching further north than ever before.

Palestinian medics say a total of 49 people have been killed in Gaza, including 22

on Wednesday. Of the total dead, medical officials have confirmed at least 15 are civilians and 10 militants, with the remainder uncertain. The rocket fire from Gaza has not caused any serious Israeli casualties.

The Israeli onslaught has caused panic in Gaza. A number of airstrikes aimed at wanted militants have also killed family members and bystanders. Many residents have huddled indoors or moved from hard-hit areas to relatives in areas that are believed to be safer.

Arab nations called for an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council and immediate action to end what they say is Israel's "outrageous onslaught" against Palestinians in Gaza.

Chantel Uwizera, spokeswoman for Rwanda's U.N. Mission, said the meeting will likely be Thursday.

2014 White House drug control policy focusing on heroin

By ALAN SUDERMAN
Associated Press

ROANOKE, Va. — Closely mirroring its past positions, the Obama administration's 2014 drug policy will focus tightly on curbing heroin use and prescription painkillers abuse while continuing to oppose the legalization of marijuana for medical and recreational use.

Officials are particularly concerned about preventing fatal overdoses, said Michael Botticelli, acting director of the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy.

He outlined the administration's blueprint at a news conference Wednesday at a drug treatment facility in Roanoke.

He acknowledged that the strategy does not substantially differ from past drug policy positions but said the White House is now focused "in-depth" on the problem associated with the abuse of opioids, which include heroin and painkillers.

"With the reports of increasing heroin use in many American communities, including right here in Virginia, we are growing increasingly concerned by the potential transition from prescription opioid abuse to heroin and injected drug use," Botticelli said.

In March, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder called the increase in heroin-related deaths an urgent health crisis and said first responders should carry Narcan, an overdose reversal drug.

New Jersey state police and EMTs began carrying the antidote naloxone, better known as Narcan, in March in response to an increase in heroin use and overdoses.

Little Egg Harbor is just one of many police departments where officers have used naloxone.

This year, actor Philip Seymour Hoffman died from a toxic mix of drugs including heroin and cocaine. In 2013, "Glee" actor Cory Monteith died of an overdose of heroin and alcohol.

Gail Burress, director of adult clinical services at Roanoke's Blue Ridge Behavioral Healthcare, where Wednesday's news conference was held, said there's been a "tremendous escalation" of heroin use in town, including among teenagers.

"It's risk-taking at a new level," she said. Botticelli said he traveled to Roanoke to highlight its comprehensive efforts to curb drug abuse.

He noted that Roanoke had the first drug court in Virginia and praised the city's police chief for implementing a program that allows first-time, non-violent drug offenders to avoid prison.

The news conference came one day after Washington became the second state, after Colorado, to allow people to buy recreational marijuana legally.

Botticelli said the White House's opposition to medicinal and recreational marijuana remains unchanged.

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