

Israeli Forces Prepare for West Bank Clashes

Israeli forces shot and killed two teenage Palestinian protesters late Wednesday after Palestinians attacked an Israel Defense Forces post near Tulkarem, raising tensions already heightened by the death of Palestinian prisoner Maysara Abu Hamdiya, 64, and renewed fighting between Israel and militants in the Gaza Strip.

The dead teens were later named as 17-year-old Amar Nasser, and 18-year-old Naji Bilbisi. Another Palestinian youth was lightly wounded near Tulkarem during the same incident.

The late-night casualties capped a day of rioting throughout the West Bank in protest against Abu Hamdiya's death from cancer, and raised the likelihood of further unrest in the Palestinian territories Thursday.

Mohammed Ayyad, a spokesman for the Palestinian Red Crescent, said the 17-year-old Palestinian was killed in a clash between the IDF and Palestinian stone-throwers at a checkpoint near Tulkarem. He was hit by a bullet in the chest, Ayyad said. The body of the second Palestinian protester was discovered early Thursday, Army Radio reported.

The Israeli military said several Palestinians had hurled firebombs at a military post near Tulkarem, and soldiers at the post fired a live round at the protesters, hitting two. The army said it was reviewing the circumstances of the incident, and looking into the possibility that the protesters had also used live fire.

Riots began to erupt in Hebron on Thursday as residents of the West Bank prepared for three funerals—Nasser and Bilbisi were to be buried in Tulkarm and Abu Hamdiya, whose autopsy has been completed, was to be buried in Hebron. Israeli security

forces were expecting large-scale disruptions as the funerals got underway.

A retired general, Abu Hamdiya had been in Israeli prisons since 2002 and was serving a life sentence for his role in a foiled attempt to bomb a busy cafe in Jerusalem in 2002. He died Tuesday morning in an Israeli hospital of what were described as complications resulting from throat cancer. After his death, Palestinian prisoners in several prisons rioted and some 4,600 Palestinian prisoners began a hunger strike. The Palestinians accuse Israel of denying Abu Hamdiya medical care, an allegation Israel rejects outright.

The Israel Prison Service braced for further disturbances, but said that while the prisoners are returning their allocated meals, they still have plenty of independently purchased food.

A senior Palestinian security official told Israel Hayom on Wednesday that Palestinian forces had been instructed not to allow any violent disturbances in the West Bank. Palestinian sources also confirmed that Abu Hamdiya's body had been handed over to his family for burial.

Health Ministry spokeswoman Einav Shimron Grinbaum said an autopsy performed Wednesday found a cancerous growth in Abu Hamdiyah's throat and secondary cancerous growths in his neck, chest, lungs, liver and spinal cord. She said hospital records showed he was a heavy smoker. The head of the Palestinian pathological institute also participated in the autopsy, she said.

Early Wednesday, Palestinian militants launched several rockets into southern Israel and Israeli aircraft struck targets in the Gaza Strip in the heaviest exchange of fire between the sides since the cease-fire that ended Operation Pillar of Defense last November.

Several rockets were fired from Gaza early on Thursday but only one exploded in Israel, causing no injuries, the military

said. It said the other projectiles exploded prematurely inside Gaza.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned that Israel will defend itself against attacks from Gaza.

“If the quiet is violated, we will respond strongly,” Netanyahu said during a meeting with visiting Norwegian Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide. “The security of Israel’s citizens is my chief concern and we will know how to defend the security of our people.”

There were no casualties in these attacks, but the violence threatened to shatter the calm that has prevailed for more than four months.

Israel’s new Defense Minister, Moshe (Bogie) Ya’alon, a former IDF chief of staff, also issued a stern warning.

“We will not allow shooting of any sort, even sporadic, toward our citizens and our forces,” Ya’alon said in a statement.

A small al-Qaida-influenced group was suspected of instigating the rocket fire, which coincided with unrest in the West Bank.

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