

Firefighters battle 3 fires caused by flaming kites on Gaza border

Fresh blazes reported near Moshav Netiv Ha'asara and Kibbutz Nir Am, as Israeli official warns Hamas over incendiary tactic.

Firefighters were dispatched Tuesday morning to the Gaza border area after flaming kites were sent soaring over the border, causing at least three fires in Israeli territory, ahead of expected violent demonstrations along the Strip's security fence.

Two large fires broke out near Kibbutz Nir Am, northeast of the Gaza Strip, while the third was reported in the area of Moshav Netiv Ha'asara, to the north.

Since the "March of Return" protests began along the Gaza border at the end of March, hundreds of kites and helium balloons have been flown into Israel outfitted with Molotov cocktails and containers of burning fuel, setting fire to large swaths of land.

A large blaze was reported south of Nir Am, across the street from the nearby town of Sderot's Sapir College.

Footage from the scene, filmed by a student, showed the fire spreading rapidly as firetrucks were heard rushing to the scene.

The fire forced authorities to temporarily close down the Route 232 highway in southern Israel until the flames could be brought under control, according to a spokesperson for the local Sha'ar Hanegev regional council. The road later reopened.

The second fire outside Nir Am broke out in nearby grazing lands, according to the Sha'ar Hanegev spokesperson.

The military anticipated that large protests would take place on Tuesday along the security fence to commemorate what Palestinians refer to as the Naksa, or setback, of Israel's victory in the 1967 Six Day War, which brought East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights under Israeli control.

Firefighters, soldiers and local residents have worked on an almost daily basis to try to contain fires in Israeli fields ignited by the burning kites.

On Sunday, the heads of the local governments in the Gaza periphery sent a letter to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon and Interior Minister Arye Deri calling for increased investment in the area in light of the precarious security situation.

“In the past week, including last night, almost 200 mortar shells and Qassam rockets have landed in Gaza periphery communities, serving as a painful reminder that the Gaza periphery must manage a fragile and complicated way of life, under constant threat to its residents,” the local mayors wrote.

Israeli officials have said that since the start of the protests at the Gaza border, there have been more than 200 fires in the Gaza periphery, destroying some 17,500 dunams (4,300 acres) of land, the majority of it in nature reserves and parks.

According to the Nature and Parks Authority, approximately 10,000 dunams in parks and reserves in southern Israel were burned, though a spokesperson for the authority said investigations were still underway to determine exactly how much of that was caused by incendiary kites and balloons, and how much was from other sources.



Palestinian protesters fly a kite with a burning rag dangling from its tail to during a protest at the Gaza Strip's border with Israel, April 20, 2018. (AP Photo/ Khalil Hamra)

On Saturday, a blaze devastated the Carmia nature reserve in southern Israel, in what officials said was the worst day of fires since the demonstrators

adopted the fire kite tactics a few months ago.

Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan said Tuesday that Israel should initiate a program of targeted assassinations against those who fly burning kites from Gaza to Israel, as well as Hamas commanders.

“The fact that Hamas is the one enabling the shooting and the sending of the kites means we must return to targeted assassinations, and the kite-launchers and Hamas commanders should be targeted for killing,” said Erdan during a visit to the southern Israeli town of Sderot.



An undated photo of an Israeli farmer in the Gaza-area driving his tractor next to a field apparently set aflame by a burning kite flown from the Gaza Strip. (Courtesy)

On Sunday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered that funds be withheld from the Palestinian Authority to compensate Israeli farmers living on the Gaza border who had their agricultural lands destroyed.

Israel's Tax Authority said the agricultural damage alone stood at NIS 5 million (\$1.4 million) and that damage caused to nature reserves and other land could drive up the figure.

President Reuven Rivlin called PA President Mahmoud Abbas on Monday and

asked him to condemn the airborne arson attacks on the Gaza border and attempts to cross into Israel.

“The terror coming from Gaza is a problem for both sides and we should hear your voice on this matter,” Rivlin said, according to Hebrew media reports. “We have to see how to stop the arson and infiltration of the border fence.”

Source: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/firefighters-battle-2-fires-caused-by-flaming-kites-on-gaza-border/>

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