**Gaza arson balloons spark 7 fires in southern Israel**

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Seven fires broke out in southern Israel on Sunday sparked by incendiary balloons launched over the border from the Gaza Strip, Israeli fire and rescue services said.

Fires were reported near the border-adjacent communities of Be’eri and Re’im as well as the nearby Kissufim Forest.

Firefighters with the assistance of the KKL Jewish National Fund and Parks and Nature Authority put out the fires by Sunday evening, officials said.

Over the weekend, more than a dozen fires were sparked in southern Israel as a result of the incendiary balloons from Gaza, after a several-week lull in the cross-border arson attacks.

In response, IDF aircraft on Friday and Saturday fired at cells of Gazans in the northern part of the Strip as they launched the devices towards Israel.

Palestinian news outlets reported no injuries in the strikes.

Over the last six months, more than 7,000 acres of land in southern Israel has been burned by fires sparked by the balloons, causing millions of shekels in damages.

This week has seen an uptick in the launching of incendiary balloons, following several weeks of relative quiet along the border that has seen months of clashes and near-daily arson attacks.

The surge of violence in Gaza began in March with a series of protests along the border that were dubbed the “March of Return.”

The clashes, which Israel says are being orchestrated by Gaza’s Hamas rulers, have included regular rock and Molotov cocktail attacks on troops, as well as shooting and IED attacks aimed at IDF soldiers and attempts to breach the border fence.

According to AP figures, more than 130 Gazans have been killed by Israeli fire since the start of the clashes. Hamas, an Islamist terror group that seized control of Gaza in 2007 and seeks to destroy Israel, has acknowledged that dozens of the Palestinian fatalities were its members.

Israel says its actions — and in particular the use of live ammunition — are necessary to defend the border and stop mass infiltrations from the territory.

Israel has accused the Hamas terror group of encouraging the protests and using them as cover to attempt to carry out terror attacks, including firing at troops and attempting to breach the border fence.

The return of the fire balloons come as tensions along the Gaza-Israel frontier have ramped back up after a brief lull, with the Hamas terror group leading weekly marches on the fence. The last several days have also seen smaller nightly protests along the border.

On Friday, one Palestinian was reported killed and at least 312 were wounded as some 10,000 Palestinians protested on the Gaza Strip border, with some throwing explosive devices, rocks, and burning tires, as soldiers responded with tear gas and occasional live fire.

One Israeli soldier was lightly injured by shrapnel from a pipe bomb thrown at troops, the army said, adding that it spotted a number of infiltration attempts.

Additionally, Israel and Hamas have engaged in a number of brief exchanges of fire in recent months that have seen terror groups in Gaza launch hundreds of rockets and mortars toward Israeli territory, including one in July that was the largest flare-up in violence since the 2014 war.

Reports have proliferated that Israel is in talks with Hamas, via UN and Egyptian mediation, for a long-term truce in the Strip.