

Israel sends more troops to West Bank after stabbing, unrest

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Ramallah (West Bank): Israel sent more troops to the West Bank on Saturday, a day after a Palestinian stabbed to death three members of an Israeli family in their home and widespread Israeli-Palestinian clashes erupted over escalating tensions at the Holy Land's most contested shrine. The 20-year-old Palestinian assailant wrote in a pre-attack Facebook post that he planned to avenge what he alleged was Israel's "desecration" of the Jerusalem holy site.

A Palestinian uses a slingshot against Israeli soldiers during clashes

Disputes over the shrine, revered by Muslims and Jews, have set off major rounds of Israeli-Palestinian confrontations in the past. They were also at the root of the current round that began last week when Arab gunmen fired from the shrine, killing two Israeli policemen. In response, Israel installed metal detectors at the gates of the 37-acre (15-hectare) walled compound, portraying the devices as a needed security measure to prevent more attacks.

Muslims alleged Israel was trying to expand its control at the Muslim-administered site under the guise of security "a claim Israel denies" and launched mass prayer protests. On Friday, anger boiled over and several thousand Palestinians clashed with Israeli security forces in the West Bank and in Jerusalem after noon prayers, the highlight of the Muslim religious week. Three Palestinians were killed and several dozen wounded by live rounds and bullets in some of the worst street clashes in the past two years.

Late on Friday, a Palestinian identified as Omar al-Abed jumped over the fence of the Israeli settlement of Halamish in the West Bank and entered a home, surprising a family during their Sabbath dinner. The Israeli military said the assailant killed a man and two of his adult children, while a woman was wounded. A neighbor heard the screams, rushed to the home and opened fire, wounding al-Abed who was taken to an Israeli hospital, said the head of Israel's rescue service.

A photo released by the military showed a kitchen floor covered with blood. Itai Orayon, a medic, said he encountered a shocking scene at the Halamish home. "Blood everywhere in the house, the floor was covered in blood," he told Israel Army Radio. He said three people were on the floor, unconscious "with deep stab wounds all over their bodies," and that the medical team was unable to save them.

On Saturday morning, Israeli troops searched the assailant's family home in the West Bank village of Kobar and detained one of his brothers, the army said. Video footage released by the military shows soldiers leading away a handcuffed and blindfolded man. The army said soldiers searched the house and measured it in preparation for eventual demolition. Ibrahim al-Abed, an uncle of the assailant, confirmed the family was told the house would be destroyed.

The uncle said his nephew had been arrested three months ago by security forces of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who presides over autonomous enclaves in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. The uncle said his nephew had endured two weeks in detention and was violently interrogated about alleged plans to attack Israelis before he was released.

In his pre-attack Facebook post, Omar al-Abed, said he planned to take action to avenge what he alleged was Israel's "desecration" of the shrine and berated Arab countries for their alleged inaction. He alleged that Israel "declared war on God," and described his plan as a suicide mission, saying that "I'm going to heaven."

Israel has repeatedly accused Abbas and his Palestinian Authority of permitting anti-Israeli incitement in the public Palestinian discourse.

Abbas has rejected such claims, saying Israel's 50-year-old occupation of lands sought for a Palestinian state is at the root of widespread anger and helps drive violence. Abbas has been a staunch opponent of violence, and in 12 tumultuous years in power always stuck to security coordination between his forces and Israeli troops against a common enemy — his Islamic militant rivals from Hamas.

On Friday evening, Abbas announced that he would "freeze" ties with Israel "on all levels" until the metal detectors are removed from the shrine, but did not say whether this means halting security coordination. Ending security ties would have far-reaching repercussions and sharply raise tensions with Israel.

Even if largely meant for domestic Palestinian consumption, the Abbas announcement dealt a setback to fledgling efforts by the Trump administration to revive long-dormant Israeli-Palestinian talks on a peace deal.

Such efforts now seem moot as Israelis and Palestinians refuse to budge in the showdown over the shrine and violence threatens to escalate.

Israel's military said Saturday it sent more troops to the West Bank. It did not elaborate but said the decision came after hundreds of troops were deployed Friday. Israel's chief of staff and defense minister visited the Halamish settlement, the scene of the stabbing attack, on Saturday.

- AP