3 buses explode in Bat Yam, Holon in suspected strategically planned terror attack

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Three empty buses exploded in quick succession in parking lots in the Tel Aviv suburbs of Bat Yam and Holon on Thursday night in what police said was a suspected terror attack.

There were no injuries reported in the incidents. Police said they neutralized two other unexploded devices on buses nearby. According to Hebrew media reports, those devices were discovered in Holon.

Each of the devices contained 5 kilograms of explosives, Hebrew media reports said.

Police said they were combing the scenes and searching for suspects, while bomb sappers were hunting for any other suspicious items in the vicinity.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office said the premier was receiving constant updates on the situation and held a security assessment late Thursday night, after which it announced that he instructed the IDF to embark on a massive operation in the West Bank against terrorist hubs.

It said he also instructed the police and Shin Bet to “increase preventative activities” in Israeli cities to prevent further attacks.

Transportation Minister Miri Regev earlier issued an order to the head of the Transportation Authority to halt service and conduct a search of all buses, trains and light rails. Regev was reported to be cutting short a visit to Morocco amid the incident.

Speaking to reporters in Bat Yam, Haim Sargarof, the Tel Aviv District police chief, said that the devices had timers but they were improvised explosives, and that the attack “looks like something [that originated] in the West Bank.”

Sargarof said there was “something written,” on the devices, without elaborating, apparently referencing media reports of a written “revenge threat” from the West Bank city of Tulkarem on one or more of the devices. He said he did not know how many suspects were involved in planning the attack. Police sources told Hebrew media later Thursday that they suspected the attack involved a West Bank terror cell.

“The revenge of the martyrs will not be forgotten so long as the occupier is present on our land… This is a jihad of either victory or martyrdom,” said a statement on a Telegram channel claiming to represent Hamas’s so-called Tulkarem Battalion, which did not directly claim responsibility for the blasts.

According to a Channel 12 news report, the devices were slated to explode on Friday morning, when the buses were in use, but were set off early. Giora Eiland, a former IDF operations chief, speculated that the timers were incorrectly set.

The network also reported that one of the undetonated devices was found due to an alert from a passenger, who notified the driver of a suspicious bag, and that police believe several suspects were involved in planting the bombs.

“We may be lucky if indeed the terrorists set these timers to the wrong hour,” police spokesman Aryeh Doron said. “But it’s too early to determine.”

In a statement, the Bat Yam Municipality said that “miraculously, the buses arrived at the parking lots a moment before the explosion,” and were already empty of their passengers.

Sargarof dodged questions about how the police did not manage to thwart the planting of so many explosive devices, appearing to blame other security agencies by saying that the Israel Defense Forces is responsible for the West Bank and the Shin Bet is responsible for preventing terrorism.

Bus drivers nationwide were reportedly told to search their vehicles before setting off in light of the attack. Security was bolstered at Ben Gurion Airport, including with stringent checks of all buses entering and leaving the airport area. Security was also bolstered for Jerusalem’s light rail, Channel 12 news said.

Before Netanyahu issued his statement, Defense Minister Israel Katz had said that he instructed the IDF to ramp up its operations in the West Bank.

“In light of the severe terror attack attempts [in the Tel Aviv area] by Palestinian terror organizations against the civilian population in Israel, I instructed the IDF to increase the intensity of the counterterrorism activity in the Tulkram refugee camp, and all the refugee camps in Judea and Samaria,” he said in a statement.

“We will hunt down the terrorists to the bitter end and destroy the terror infrastructure in the camps used as front line posts of the Iranian evil axis,” Katz added. “Residents who give shelter to terror will pay a heavy price.”

The IDF has been carrying out a major offensive in the northern West Bank, dubbed Operation Iron Wall, since January 21.

Following Katz’s statement, the military said it was investigating the bus bombings jointly with the Shin Bet security agency and Israel Police, adding that after a fresh assessment, the IDF’s ongoing counterterrorism operation in the West Bank would be focused on specific areas per the findings of the probe.

Additionally, the IDF said it has blocked several checkpoints leading into the West Bank in specific areas, and will ramp up activities in the so-called seam zone, the area between the Green Line and Israel’s West Bank barrier.

It also announced that three more battalions will be deployed as reinforcements to the West Bank, after holding a situational assessment.

The military said that it was constantly assessing and “prepared to expand the offensive operations,” while adding “the counterterrorism mission in northern Samaria is continuing all the time,” using the biblical name for the northern West Bank.