**Police clear kindergarten in south after suspected Gaza balloon bomb found**

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A kindergarten in southern Israel was evacuated Thursday morning after a teacher spotted a suspicious object in the playground that was later found to be an explosive device, apparently flown into Israel from the nearby Gaza Strip, officials said.

Sappers were called to the scene to remove the device from the kindergarten in the Eshkol region, a local government spokesperson said.

“The object was collected by security officers and handled by them,” the Eshkol spokesperson said.

In a separate case, a security jeep caught fire in Kibbutz Alumim, some four kilometers (2.5 miles) from the Gaza border, because of an airborne incendiary device from the Strip, according to the fire department.

“The incident is under control, and there are no injuries,” said the spokesperson for the fire department’s southern district.

“The fire was sparked when the vehicle went over an incendiary balloon. The small blaze that was under the car sparked a fire in a pipe in the fuel system, which caused the fire to spread to the front part of the car and caused significant damage to the vehicle,” he said.

Gadi Yarkoni, the head of the Eshkol regional council, lauded the kindergarten teacher’s swift actions and called on the government to take action against Palestinians launching incendiary balloons into Israel.

“I expect the government of Israel to show responsibility toward its citizens and to end this ongoing terror in order to ensure the security of residents. The writing is on the wall. The responsibility is on you,” Yarkoni said in a statement.

Thursday’s two suspected attacks from Gaza came amid an uptick in airborne arson attempts from the coastal enclave, following a brief lull earlier in the week.

On Wednesday evening, an Israeli military drone fired at a group of Palestinians launching airborne arson devices at Israel from the southern Gaza Strip, Palestinian media reported.

The Israel Defense Forces confirmed at the time that one of its aircraft had shot at “a terrorist spotted releasing incendiary balloons” toward Israeli territory.

No Palestinians were injured in the strike, east of Bureij in southern Gaza, according to the Hamas-linked Shehab news outlet.

Arson attacks, which had taken place on an almost daily basis since late March, all but halted entirely from last Thursday to Tuesday.

Firefighters were called to extinguish two blazes in southern Israel on Tuesday that were believed to have been sparked by airborne incendiary devices from the Strip.

Tensions between Israel and terror groups in the Strip skyrocketed in recent weeks as the two sides attempt to reach a long-term ceasefire brokered by Egypt and the United Nations.

Saturday saw a large-scale flareup between Israel and the Iran-backed Palestinian Islamic Jihad terror group — the second-largest organization in the Strip after Hamas — in which dozens of rockets and mortar shells were fired at southern Israel. In response, the IDF bombed some 90 targets in the Gaza Strip.

Egyptian mediators have been working intensively to maintain calm, and also hope to bring about national reconciliation between Hamas, which seized Gaza by force in 2007, and the West Bank-based administration of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

Hamas says the blockade must be lifted first and has vowed to continue the weekly protests, in which more than 160 Palestinians have been killed since March. The terror group has acknowledged that dozens of the dead were its members. A Palestinian sniper killed an Israeli soldier in July.

The protests, dubbed the “Great March of Return,” have mostly involved the burning of tires and rock-throwing along the security fence, but have also seen shooting attacks, bombings and attempted border breaches as well as the sending of incendiary balloons and kites into Israel.

Israel says it maintains the blockade to prevent Hamas, which seeks to destroy Israel, from importing weaponry.