At least nine Palestinians killed as Israel mounts major West Bank operation

Reuters- At least nine Palestinians were killed on Wednesday, Palestinian authorities said, as Israeli forces raided the flashpoint cities of Jenin and Tulkarm as well as other areas in the occupied West Bank in a major operation involving helicopters and drones.

The assault, one of the largest seen in the West Bank for months, followed a series of smaller raids in the area over recent weeks as Israeli forces sought to crush groups of fighters from Palestinian militant groups.

With Israeli forces battling Hamas fighters in Gaza and facing a major escalation of tensions with the Iranian-backed Hezbollah movement in southern Lebanon, Wednesday's operation underscored the multiple security threats Israel has been battling since the start of the Gaza war last year.

The armed wings of the Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Fatah factions said in separate statements their gunmen were detonating bombs against Israeli military vehicles in the three West Bank areas.

By midday, the city of Jenin was relatively quiet but in the crowded refugee camp, a heavily built up township adjacent to the main urban area, occasional explosions could be heard.

A short distance outside the city, blood soaked the ground next to a damaged car and an impact crater from a drone strike the Israeli military said had killed three militant fighters.

The Palestinian health ministry said troops had surrounded Jenin's main hospital, blocking off access with earth mounds –

a measure the military said was intended to stop fighters seeking refuge.

The Israeli army released video on Tuesday that it said showed Qaid Farhan Alkadi,

A military spokesperson said Wednesday's operation followed a sharp rise in militant activity in recent months, with more than 150 attacks involving shooting or explosives from Tulkarm and Jenin in the past year.

He said the military assessed there was an "immediate threat" to civilians but he said the operation was part of a broad strategy aimed at thwarting attacks.

"This terror threat in this area is not new, it hasn't started yesterday and it's not going to end tomorrow," Lieutenant Colonel Nadav Shoshani told reporters in a briefing.

Earlier, the military released the names of five Palestinians identified as militant fighters who were killed in Tulkarm on Monday. Two were claimed by Hamas and three by Islamic Jihad.

'SOMETHING CAME DOWN FROM THE SKY'

As well as the major raids in Jenin and Tulkarm, two of the most volatile cities in the northern West Bank, the military said forces also raided the town of Far'a near Tubas in the Jordan Valley, killing at least four people in a drone strike.

Masoud Naaja, the father of two young men killed in the strike, said he was giving water to some men who asked for a drink when he was wounded.

"In seconds, very fast, we felt like something came down on us from the sky and there was an explosion," he said. "When I put my hand on my chest, it was full of shrapnel and blood."

Clashes in the West Bank have risen sharply since the start of

the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. Israel, which says Iran has provided weapons and support to the militant factions, has stepped up operations, while Jewish settlers have also launched frequent vigilante-style attacks on Palestinian communities.

Thousands of Palestinians have been arrested in raids and more than 660 – fighters and civilians – have been killed in the West Bank and East Jerusalem since the war in Gaza began nearly 11 months ago, according to Palestinian Health Ministry figures.

At least 30 Israelis have been killed in attacks in Jerusalem and the West Bank during the period, according to Israeli tallies.

The latest round of Israeli-Palestinian violence began on Oct. 7 after Hamas militants stormed into southern Israel, killing 1,200 and taking more than 250 hostages, according to Israeli figures.

Israel's Gaza campaign has since levelled swathes of the enclave, displaced nearly all its 2.3 million people multiple times, given rise to deadly hunger and disease and killed more than 40,500 people, Palestinian health officials say.

Internationally mediated talks to end the conflict continue, with Hamas and Israel trading blame for a lack of progress, and the United States expressing optimism that a ceasefire can be reached.

Reuters