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### TRIGGER-HAPPY ISRAELI SOLDIERS

By  
Isabel Kershner

Days after the deadly flare-up along Israel's border with Gaza, during which Israeli troops killed 15 Palestinians, a new war – of videos and strong statements – has erupted over what happened, and why.

The violence has waned in what was the bloodiest day in Gaza since the war of 2014, but both sides have been pressing their cases to defend their actions.

Palestinians, supported by human rights groups, view the events as a legitimate protest that was met with disproportionate force by trigger-happy Israeli soldiers.

Israel says it acted judiciously to prevent a dangerous breach of its borders and sovereignty led by Hamas, the Islamic group that controls Gaza, and to protect nearby communities. The toll would have been much higher, Israel says, if the protesters had managed to break through the security barrier.

But, nobody did actually cross the fence on Friday (30 March 2018).

The episode has elicited international concern and condemnation. The United Nations and the European Union have called for an independent and transparent investigation.

Israel's defence minister, Avigdor Lieberman, ruled out participation in any commission of inquiry, telling Army Radio on Sunday that the Israeli military "did what had to be done".

The march on Friday was the start of a six-week campaign dubbed the Great Return March. The organisers said it was intended to raise international awareness of the long-standing blockade of the isolated and impoverished coastal enclave, imposed by Israel and Egypt, and to support the Palestinian demand to return to homes lost in 1948, in what is now Israel.

Mkhaimar Abusada, a professor of political science at Al-Azhar University in Gaza, said that from what he had heard there was no plan to cross the border. "It was a mass Palestinian non-violent protest against Israel, and to approach the border area," he said. "But, when you have large crowds, you cannot control – so yes, some tried to infiltrate the borders between Gaza and Israel."

Ahmed Abu Artema, a Gazan social-media activist who initiated the protest, said by telephone on Sunday that the idea of returning to the lands lost in 1948 was a "strategic goal" that would "not necessarily be achieved within a month or a year", but that the protesters along the borders would determine the timing.

Hamas, which quickly adopted the return campaign, played a large role in orchestrating it. The Islamic group said five of those killed belonged to its military wing, but said they were participating in the protest "side by side" with their people.

Israeli authorities named eight of those killed as Hamas fighters or activists and said two more belonged to other militant factions.

The Israeli military produced a video showing what it said was one of the Hamas fighters and an accomplice shooting at Israeli forces across the fence in northern Gaza before being killed by Israeli tank and gunfire.

Another army collection of video images showed protesters hurling stones and firebombs and rolling burning tires at the fence, apparently in an effort to set it on fire.

On the other side of the divide, videos circulated widely on social media appearing to show unarmed protesters being shot by the Israelis.

In one, a youth identified as Abdel Fattah Abd al-Nabi, 19, is shot in the back as he runs away from the fence carrying a tyre; in a second, a woman is shot as she approaches the fence waving a Palestinian flag; in a third, a man is shot in the leg when he stands up after praying by the fence.

Israel identified al-Nabi, who was killed, as a Hamas fighter, but Hamas' military wing did not claim him as one of its members.

Gaza health officials said an additional 800 protesters were injured by live fire.

Brig Gen Ronen Manelis, the chief army spokesman, described that as "nonsense" in an interview on Sunday, saying the number of live-fire

injuries was more likely in the dozens, with the rest hit by rubber bullets or suffering the effects of tear gas.

Manelis said that his troops had fired precisely, and that there was information that Hamas was planning attacks under the cover of the protests, like the cross-border shooting. He would not detail the rules of engagement but said the principle was “not to allow the sabotage of military infrastructure and not to allow any mass crossing of the fence”.

He said his forces in the field had described al-Nabi as one of the most active participants in rolling burning tyres towards the fence, but said the military would examine each episode. **NYT**

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Isabel Kershner is a correspondent in Jerusalem for *The New York Times* covering Israeli and Palestinian politics and society, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and diplomatic efforts to resolve it. This article was taken from *The New Straits Times*, dated 3 April 2018. It was originally published in *The New York Times*, NYT dated 1 April 2018.

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