

1 dead as Israel targets Hamas

New drive to curb group, experts say

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By Christine Spolar, Tribune foreign correspondent.

JERUSALEM — Israeli troops killed a top Hamas fugitive and destroyed the home of another militant in the Gaza Strip on Monday in what appeared to be a second day of retaliation against the influential Islamic militant group.

The attacks followed other violence in Gaza over the weekend, including the deaths of six members of Hamas in an explosion Sunday and the killings of four Israeli soldiers in an attack on a tank Saturday for which Hamas claimed responsibility.

Monday's action was characterized by some Israeli media as the launch of a fierce operation in Gaza against Hamas, which is blamed for dozens of deadly assaults. Israeli army officials would not discuss the breadth of the latest army assault.

In the death of the Hamas militant, Israeli troops leaped from a van filled with vegetables as Riyadh Abu Zeid traveled along Gaza's coastal road, The Associated Press reported. In an exchange of gunfire, Abu Zeid was wounded, the army said.

Israeli troops seized Abu Zeid, who died as he was being taken by helicopter to an Israeli hospital, the army said.

The army described Abu Zeid, 32, as a senior member of Hamas' military wing who had organized attacks against Israeli targets in the Gaza Strip and suicide bombings inside Israel.

Earlier Monday, Israeli tanks and helicopters surrounded the five-story home of Ahmed Ghandour, reportedly a top aide to a Hamas bombmaker. Ghandour, who remains in hiding, allegedly is linked to planning the weekend tank attack in which four Israeli soldiers died.

Army officials said troops ordered people out of the building in Gaza City, and Palestinian gunmen attacked. Soldiers returned fire, the army said. Hospital officials later said a Palestinian policeman and a suspected militant were killed and five people wounded. The house was destroyed.

The focus on Hamas comes three weeks after Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz hinted that Israel might take over Gaza. Pressure is mounting on Gaza and Hamas amid failed attempts at a cease-fire by Palestinian factions.

Egypt again is appealing to the Palestinian political and militant leaders to renew talks, which fizzled in January. Hamas, which has sapped popularity from Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, was roundly blamed for the talks' failure.

On Monday, Israel and the Palestinians sent delegations to London to meet with mediators from the United States, Russia, the United Nations and the European Union to discuss a possible peace plan. The Mideast mediators have been working for months with little success.

Political commentators were cautious about characterizing the Israeli military attacks in Gaza on Monday, but they acknowledged that circumstances had recently created a new vulnerability for the Hamas stronghold. As the rest of the world focuses on possible war with Iraq, they said, any conflict in Gaza, an impoverished sliver of Palestinian territory, will likely be ignored.

"Hamas has stood out as a force that needs to be reckoned with," said Hisham Ahmed, a professor at Bir Zeit University who has studied Hamas' growing political influence. "The Israelis will likely wait for the most opportune moment--and that will likely be during the invasion of Iraq."

"There will be pressures to do something drastic about Hamas," said Eran Lerman, a former Shin Bet deputy. "Hamas is getting very strong. It is operating in parts of Gaza almost freely. [Israeli efforts] might not be a campaign as such . . . but a hard blow at Hamas is not entirely out of the question."

Israel appeared to be preparing other fronts in its war against Palestinian militancy. According to the Israeli daily Ha'aretz, the army plans to double the capacity of the Ketsiot detention center east of Gaza, to 2,400 prisoners.

Israel's detention centers are packed after more than two years of arrests in the West Bank and Gaza since the outbreak of the violence in September 2000 and, according to media reports here, about 5,000 Palestinians are held by Israel.