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Israel strikes Gaza Strip after rocket fire: army

Israeli warplanes raided the Gaza Strip before dawn on Saturday in what officials said was a retaliatory strike for rocket fire from the Palestinian territory controlled by Hamas.

The exchange of fire came hours after US President Joe Biden had visited Israel and the West Bank.

“Fighter jets struck a military site in the central Gaza Strip belonging to the Hamas terrorist organisation,” the Israeli army said. “The military site consists of an underground complex containing raw materials used for the manufacturing of rockets.”

The strike “will significantly impede and undermine Hamas’ force-building capabilities”, it said, adding Israel was responding to “attacks from the Gaza Strip on Israeli territory”.

Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem denounced the strikes, which the official Palestinian news agency, WAFA, said caused no injuries. WAFA said Israeli missiles were fired at two locations, one “near a tourist resort” where nearby houses were severely damaged.

In further retaliation for the Gaza rocket fire, Israel said late on Saturday it was suspending a decision to increase the quota of permits for Gazans to work in the Jewish state. It was raised by 1500 permits before Mr Biden’s visit, allowing 15,500 Gazan workers into Israel. Hamas “carries responsibility for all activities directed against Israel in and from the Gaza Strip, and it will bear the consequences”, said the Israeli Defence Ministry body responsible for civil affairs in the Palestinian territories.

There had been two separate launches towards Israel on Friday night, each of two rockets, the military said. One had been intercepted while the other three fell on empty land.

Impoverished Gaza, home to 2.3 million Palestinians, has been under Israeli blockade since 2007 when Iran-backed Hamas seized power from the secular Fatah movement of Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas.

Before flying to Saudi Arabia on Friday, Mr Biden visited the West Bank where he reiterated his administration’s commitment to a two-state solution to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There “must be a political horizon that the Palestinian people can actually see”, he said.

“I know that the goal of the two states seems so far away,” he said in Bethlehem, standing alongside Mr Abbas. Mr Abbas said “recognising the state of Palestine” was the key to peace. With Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations moribund since 2014, the US delegation was focused on economic measures.

Mr Biden announced an extra $US200m ($147m) for the UN agency for Palestinian refugees. Donald Trump had cut funding to the agency. During a visit to a hospital in East Jerusalem, Mr Biden pledged a $US100m aid package for medical institutions in the area and announced plans to roll out infrastructure for 4G internet across Gaza and the West Bank by the end of 2023.

AFP