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Mar 3, 2:56 PM EST

Three Hamas Militants Killed in Gaza

By IBRAHIM BARZAK
Associated Press Writer

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) -- An Israeli helicopter strike killed three Hamas militants riding in a car Wednesday, the second such targeted attack in five days and a possible sign that Israel is stepping up its campaign against militants ahead of a planned withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.



Two missiles slammed into the car, triggering a fire that bystanders tried to put out with sand and their jackets. One man, using a blanket, lifted a charred body out of the car and heaved it onto a stretcher.

The Israeli military said one of those killed, 24-year-old Tarad Jamal, was behind several roadside bombings and rocket attacks on Israelis. The other two were identified as Ibrahim Deri, 34, and Amar Hassan, 21.

On its Web site, Hamas indicated that the three were about to carry out an attack. "The three martyrs were on a holy mission when the Zionist U.S.-made helicopters fired two missiles toward their vehicle," the statement said.

Hamas leader Sheik Ahmed Yassin said the Islamic militant group would keep up attacks against Israel. "The Palestinian people will continue their resistance despite this aggression," Yassin said.

Wednesday's strike, near the Jewish settlement of Netzarim, came just five days after Israeli helicopters fired missiles at a car in the same area, killing three militants of the Islamic Jihad group.

There has been some expectation that Israel would step up its strikes against militants in Gaza ahead of a proposed withdrawal. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has said he would dismantle most Israeli settlements in the strip and impose a boundary on the Palestinians if peace talks remain frozen in coming months.

Avi Pazner, an Israeli government spokesman, said Israel would continue its campaign against militant groups even after a pullout.

The prospect of an Israeli withdrawal has also fueled internal Palestinian strife in Gaza, with armed gangs and corrupt members of the security forces jockeying for power.

On Tuesday, gunmen killed Khalil al-Zaben,

AP VIDEO



Three killed in Israeli air strike in Gaza

an adviser to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Police have made no arrests, but a security official said privately he believed the attackers had ties to Arafat's Fatah movement. So far, Islamic militant groups, Arafat's main political rivals, have stayed out of the internal fighting.

Sharon has pledged to coordinate the Gaza pullout and other unilateral steps with the United States. A top Sharon aide, Dov Weisglass, met earlier this week with U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice.

A senior Israeli official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Wednesday that U.S. officials did not reject unilateral steps, but expressed concerns about security and humanitarian issues. U.S. officials have said Israeli actions should fit into the "road map" peace plan, which moves through three stages to a Palestinian state next year.

Talks on the plan have been frozen for months, and neither side has carried out even its first provisions - halt violence, dismantle militant groups and end construction in Jewish settlements.

Also Wednesday, Israeli troops in the West Bank killed a Palestinian who belonged to the Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, an armed gang with ties to Fatah. The army said the man, who had an assault rifle, approached troops during an arrest operation in the Tulkarem refugee camp, and they opened fire.

A Palestinian demonstrator wounded by soldiers in a clash last week over Israel's West Bank separation barrier died in a hospital. He was the third man to die from a clash between soldiers and stone throwers near the village of Bidou, where Israel is planning to build a section of the barrier.

Israel says it needs the contentious barrier of razor wire, cement walls and trenches to keep Palestinian suicide bombers out of Israeli towns and cities. However, the barrier dips into the West Bank in some areas, and Palestinians say it is a land grab meant to prevent them from establishing a state.

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AP VIDEO



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