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Hamas admits to fatal Israeli bus bombings

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JERUSALEM (CNN) – The militant Islamic group Hamas admitted Sunday that it carried out two bus bombings that killed 25 people and injured more than 80 in Jerusalem and Ashkelon.

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The fundamentalists said they were avenging last month's killing of the group's master bomb maker, Yahya Ayyash.

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The guerrilla who boarded the Jerusalem bus hid his bomb in an army kit bag, Internal Security Minister Moshe Shahal told Reuters.

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"The fact is that no one noticed anything suspicious about him," said Shahal, who is in charge of national police.

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The first bomb ripped through a commuter bus during morning rush hour in Jerusalem, killing 23 people, including two Americans, and injuring 49. The 10-kilogram bomb was packed with nails, ball bearings and bullets that shredded human flesh and made identification of bodies extremely difficult, officials said. The bus was reduced to a charred skeleton.

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Forty-five minutes later, a second bus exploded southwest of Jerusalem in Ashkelon, killing two people and injuring 31.

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The dead Americans were identified as Mattityahu Eisenfeld, 25, of Hartford, Connecticut, and his girlfriend, Sarah Duker, in her 20s, of Teaneck, New Jersey.

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Embassy spokesman Richard Scorza said that Eisenfeld was a student at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Jerusalem and Duker studied at Hebrew University, also in Jerusalem.

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"When you see the bodies, your own citizens lying on the ground on Sunday morning, it breaks your heart," said Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert, who "blamed" the suicide attackers for jeopardizing peace in the Middle East. (204K AIFF sound or 204K WAV sound)

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In a call to Israel Radio, a man speaking Arabic claimed responsibility for the bombings on behalf of the Izzedine al-Qassam, the military wing of Hamas, which has led opposition to peace-making with Israel.



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The caller said two Hamas "heroes," one with 22 pounds of TNT and the other with 11 pounds, carried out the attacks to avenge the January 5 assassination of Hamas bomb-maker Yehiye Ayyash and commemorate the second anniversary of

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http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9602/israel_explosion/02-25/

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the Hebron mosque massacre.

As a result of the blast, Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres suspended contacts with Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority and sealed off the West Bank and Gaza Strip, barring 60,000 Arab workers from jobs in Israel.

Peres said Israel will continue with the peace process, but his country is "determined to fight Hamas." (170K AIFF sound or 170K WAV sound)

Arafat also condemned (230K AIFF sound or 230K WAV sound) the bombings, saying they threatened the peace process.

"It's not a military operation, it's a terrorist operation. I condemn it and I condemn the power behind it."

**— Yasser Arafat, President,
Palestinian Authority**



Pope John Paul II joined those leaders and others in other countries in denouncing the attacks.

"I express firm condemnation for the new, cruel recourse to violence," the Pope said.

Twisted wreckage

Prime Minister Peres rushed to the scene of the Jerusalem bombing, escorted by dozens of police. Several demonstrators hurled insults, shouting, "Peres, go home!" After Peres left, more Israelis gathered at the scene and chanted, "With blood and fire, we will throw out Peres."



Mourners lit candles in the middle of the street near the wreckage of bus No. 18, which was filled with riders on Jaffa Road in downtown Jerusalem when the blast occurred at 6:48 a.m. In its wake was a charred skeleton of twisted metal.

"The bus went up into the air," said witness Yigal Kara. "I saw parts of bodies. A head fell in front of us to the ground."

In Ashkelon, the attack was carried out by a man dressed in an Israeli army uniform who had just mingled with nearby soldiers, a local Israel television station reported. That explosion occurred near a bus stop and a soldier hitchhiking post.



Peres called on Arafat to crack down on Muslim militants in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. A Hamas leader, Sayyed Abu Musameh, said members of the group — believed to number about 40 — were arrested by Palestinian security forces in the Gaza Strip.



Debris from Sunday's blast in Jerusalem

Israeli officials had received warnings that the militants were planning suicide attacks to avenge Ayyash, who was assassinated Jan. 5. Israeli officials were blamed for the death. Ayyash had orchestrated at least seven suicide bombings, which killed 55 people over the past two years.

Sunday also marked the second anniversary of the Hebron mosque massacre in which a Jewish settler shot and killed 29 Muslim worshipers. In response to the massacre, Hamas set off several bus bombings.

Sunday's bombings were the first in Israel since early November, when two car bombers targeted Israeli buses in the Gaza Strip, injuring 11 people. The bombers were killed. Five people died in Jerusalem on August 21, 1995, when a suicide bomber exploded a commuter bus. Hamas claimed responsibility for the attack.

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