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Jerusalem suicide bomber injures 20: Police corner Palestinian disguised as Orthodox Jew

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A Palestinian suicide bomber disguised as an Orthodox Jew smiled and then blew himself up on a road lined with schools, restaurants and a maternity hospital during the morning rush hour yesterday, injuring 20 people.

It was the fifth bomb attack in the city in 36 hours.

The explosion on HaNeviim - Street of the Prophets - crumpled three cars and threw human remains across a stretch of the road in full view of dozens of schoolchildren. The bomber's head landed in the yard of the French lycee, where children were lining up for the beginning of the school day.

But the nails and shards of metal in the bomb caused mercifully few casualties, because Israeli border policemen ran the bomber down and prevented him reaching far more crowded parts of the city.

An accomplice, who was trapped by the police and a doctor, needed surgery for his wounds, a hospital source said.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack.

At the moment of the explosion a reporter for French radio, Pierre Weill, was pulling up at the lycee with his daughter Ines, 12, who was slightly injured.

The lycee and an Anglican school a hundred metres up the road are mainly used by foreign nationals.

"The second she opened the door we heard a very strong explosion," Mr Weill said. "She immediately started crying. Now she is under shock, and I think we will have problems in the next few days."

After three pipe bombs and a car bomb exploded on Monday, causing relatively slight injuries, a serious suicide attack in Jerusalem seemed only a matter of time.

One on August 9 on a kosher pizza restaurant only metres away from HaNeviim, which marks the border of an ultra-Orthodox district, killed 15 Israelis.

Yesterday's attack involved a new tactic by a Palestinian suicide bomber: the use of a fake beard and black clothing to disguise the attacker as an observant Jew. But it did not work.

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Guy Mughrabi, one of the policemen who stopped the bomber, said: "There are thousands of Orthodox Jews in this city, but this one seemed suspicious. He was agitated and kept looking around."

The bomber, who was in his mid-20s, wore a fake black beard, black trousers and a white shirt, and the kippa (head covering), of an Orthodox Jew, Mr Mughrabi said. He was carrying a backpack.

"We shouted after him: 'Stop, stop.' When we were three or four metres away he turned halfway towards us, and smiled. Then he reached into a pocket of his backpack, and hit the button, and flew into the air."

He added: "I was not really thinking of the danger at that moment. But afterwards, I checked that I still had all the parts of my body."

His fellow officer suffered serious head injuries.

This week's spate of explosions has deepened the Jerusalemites' sense of powerlessness and isolation.

Within minutes of the blast, foreign ministry officials were summoned to the police cordons to tell journalists that the suicide attack was the direct result of this week's condemnation of Israel at the UN conference on racism in Durban, South Africa.

Michal Cafrey-Yardeni, an adviser to the Israeli education minister, who was slightly injured while driving to work, said: "I think I had a miracle today. I really realised the difference a few seconds and a few metres (can make)."

Several bystanders were furious with the prime minister, Ariel Sharon, for going ahead with a visit to Moscow yesterday. There were also the inevitable demands for severe retaliation.

The mayor of Jerusalem, Ehud Olmert, said: "I know there is no absolute answer (to terror), no magical solution."

"We must not sell illusions to the public. We must continue to strike at them."

Yesterday the sense of siege engulfed Jerusalem's small expatriate community. As parents arrived at the lycee to take their shaken children home, a school official said: "Some are in shock. The children and their teachers need a quiet place."

Since the beginning of the academic year this week the lycee has forbidden its pupils children to leave the school yard until the end of classes, and posted a guard on the gate.

"I always knew this could happen," said a teacher huddled on the steps, who declined to give her name. "But we simply went on hoping it would not."

Linda Grant, page 16 Special report on Israel and the Middle East at guardian.co.uk/israel

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