

UN says more than 19,000 displaced in Lebanon as Israel border clashes escalate



Beirut, October 23 (RHC)-- More than 19,000 people have been internally displaced in Lebanon since early October, according to the United Nations migration agency, amid soaring tensions near the Israel-Lebanon border after the Israel-Hamas war erupted.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) said 19,646 people had been displaced inside Lebanon since it began tracking movements on October 8, the day after an assault on Israel by Hamas fighters and an Israeli offensive on the besieged Gaza Strip.

It said the movements were mostly by those fleeing the south of Lebanon, while some people have also moved from other areas. "We expect the numbers to rise as the cross-border tensions continue," IOM spokesperson Mohammed Ali Abunajela said in a statement, as cited by the AFP news agency.

At least 1,400 people were killed in the Hamas attack, most of them civilians, according to Israeli authorities. Israel has since bombarded Gaza relentlessly, killing more than 5,000 people, mostly civilians, according to Palestinian authorities.

As Israel escalated its Gaza offensive, the Iran-backed Hezbollah group, which is based in southern Lebanon, has increased its attacks on Israeli targets. Israel has carried out cross-border strikes and bombardments on Lebanon, while Palestinian groups have also launched limited infiltration attempts into Israel.

Several communities have been told to evacuate in Israel, while thousands of people in Lebanon have fled border towns to other parts of the south or to areas closer to the capital Beirut.

Abunajela said the movement of people is not helping an already "deteriorating" situation in the country. "Amidst a deteriorating economic situation and the significant rise in poverty across all populations in Lebanon, internal displacements may add additional stress to the resources of host communities," he said.

Many who have fled south Lebanon have moved north to the coastal city of Tyre, which is 18km (11 miles) from the border. Inaya Ezzeddine, a lawmaker from Tyre, said the movement was putting a strain on families hosting the displaced and the government of a country struggling with an economic crisis.

"This war is happening amid a very big economic crisis and people don't have provisions," Ezzeddine told the Reuters news agency, adding that around 6,000 people had sought refuge in Tyre and three schools had been used to shelter some of them.

"We cannot open all schools because schools are still operating. Every school we open [for the displaced], we're depriving its pupils from using it," she added.

The soaring tensions on the Israel-Lebanon border have raised fears that armed groups could potentially join the war in support of Hamas. Analysts have warned that Hezbollah could escalate its involvement if Israel launches a ground invasion of Gaza.

Hezbollah says 27 of its fighters have been killed in the clashes since October 7. Lebanese security sources say 11 fighters from Palestinian groups in Lebanon, which are allied to Hezbollah, have also been killed, according to the Reuters news agency.

Israel's military says seven troops have been killed along the border area.

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