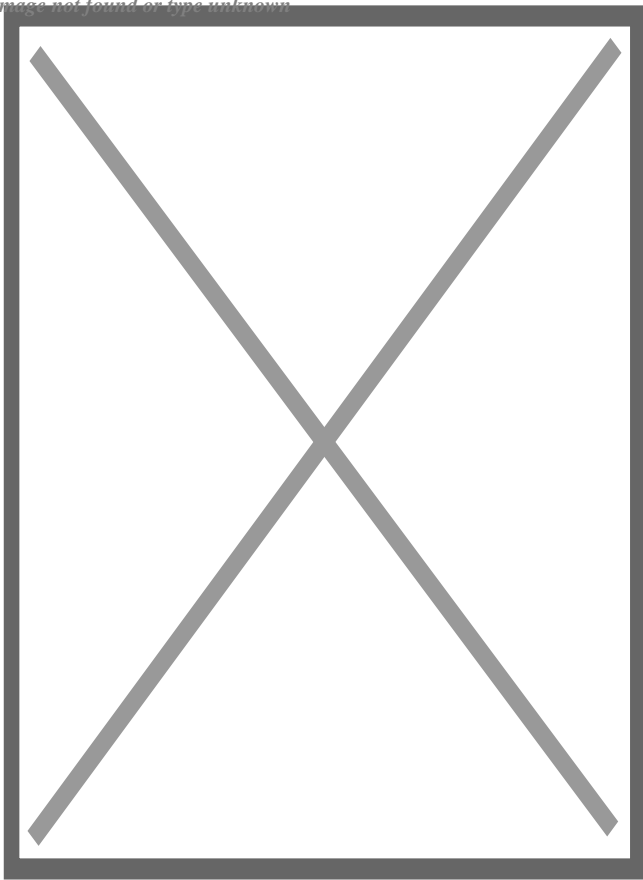


UN secretary-general affirms the world cannot afford Lebanon becoming another Gaza

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United Nations, June 22 (RHC)-- United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres expressed increasing concern over the escalating war of words and deadly border clashes between Israel's military and Lebanon's Hezbollah fighters.

UN peacekeepers are working to calm the situation and prevent "miscalculation" after both sides heightened their rhetoric and raised the possibility of full-scale conflict, he said on Friday.

“One rash move – one miscalculation – could trigger a catastrophe that goes far beyond the border and, frankly, beyond imagination,” Guterres told reporters. “Let’s be clear: The people of the region and the people of the world cannot afford Lebanon to become another Gaza.”

A UN peacekeeping force UNIFIL, as well as unarmed technical observers known as UNTSO, have long been stationed in southern Lebanon to monitor hostilities along the demarcation line between Lebanon and Israel, known as the Blue Line.

“UN peacekeepers are on the ground working to de-escalate tensions and help prevent miscalculation,” Guterres said. “The world must say loudly and clearly: immediate de-escalation is not only possible – it is essential. There is no military solution.”

Hezbollah has fired rockets and drones into Israel since it launched the war on Gaza last October with the Israelis responding with deadly air strikes and heavy artillery fire. Hundreds have been killed and tens of thousands displaced along the border.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Yoav Gallant have previously pledged to “turn Beirut into Gaza”. This week, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah warned of “no restraint and no rules” if Israel launches a major attack on Lebanon.

Analysts have said it remains unclear if both sides are upping their threats as deterrence, or if they are actually on the brink of all-out war. In terms of Israel’s war on Gaza, one expert said it is not accurate to compare Palestinian armed groups with Lebanese Hezbollah.

“Hezbollah is more trained, more organized with even more lethal weapons compared to Qassam Brigades, Hamas’s armed wing. And for this reason, I think the Israelis will pay a huge price for something they can avoid,” Hassan Barari, a professor of international affairs at Qatar University, told Al Jazeera.

Orna Mizrahi, a former official in Israel’s National Security Council, said none of the options are good for the country.

“But the big question is, how much can Israel suffer under this attack? I think most of the government doesn’t really want to get into a war, but it’s possible that we are getting there,” she said.

In Lebanon, Nasrallah’s comments left many bracing for a wider war. But some diplomats and analysts said his threats are an attempt to match the escalating rhetoric from Israel. “To me, now this is part of a deterrent strategy,” said Hubert Faustmann, professor of history and international relations at the University of Nicosia.

“There is a high danger of Israel escalating the confrontation with Hezbollah and an all-out, full-scale war, which I don’t think Hezbollah wants,” Faustmann added, saying Hezbollah is demonstrating what it “could do” if that were to happen.

Hezbollah has indicated it is not seeking a wider conflict, even as it has steadily drawn on more potent weaponry.

While Israel has the most powerful army in the Middle East, Hezbollah has thousands of fighters, many with experience in the Syrian civil war, and an arsenal of tens of thousands of missiles capable of hitting cities all over Israel.

It also has a large fleet of drones, one of which appears to have carried out an extended flight over the port city of Haifa this week, underlining the potential threat to key economic infrastructure including power systems.

There are fears a wider escalation could overwhelm Israel's Iron Dome missile defence system, which has so far intercepted most of the hundreds of missiles fired by Hezbollah. "My sense is that Hezbollah feels it has some leverage over the Israelis, because an escalating war – as much damage as it might do in Lebanon and Syria – would create terror in Israel," said Seth G Jones, an analyst at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC.

"It would be a tall order for Israeli air defences to confront the widespread rocket arsenal coming from the north. It would be a huge problem."

Israel has had bruising experiences in Lebanon in the past. After its forces invaded in 1982, they were stuck holding a buffer zone for nearly two decades after a war that saw the birth of Hezbollah. There was a second 34-day war in 2006 that bloodied both sides.

But the political pressure on Netanyahu has swelled with no indication of when life will return to normal more than eight months after the beginning of the conflict. Dozens of Israeli towns are deserted with about 60,000 people evacuated to temporary accommodation, leaving empty streets with the occasional building scarred by rocket fire. Some 90,000 have also fled southern Lebanon.

Sarit Zehavi – a former Israeli military intelligence official who runs a think tank that specialises on Israel's northern border – said after the trauma Israel suffered on October 7, few of those who left their homes would be ready to return while Hezbollah remained entrenched along the border.

"For 17 years, we did nothing against the threat and now dealing with it will cost a very high price," Zehavi said.

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