

Lebanon's medical workers deliberately targetted by Israeli war machine

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Medical staff waits for the arrival of an ambulance outside a hospital, after an Israeli strike in the southern suburbs of Beirut, Lebanon, September 20, 2024 [Amr Abdallah Dalsh/Reuters]

Beirut, October 9 (RHC)-- On Monday, Israel killed 10 firefighters in a strike on the southern Lebanese town of Baraachit, near Bint Jbeil, in what rescue workers have described as a deliberate attack. The killings pushed the number of rescue workers Israel has killed in Lebanon to more than 100 in the past year – most of them in the past two weeks.

“It’s a tragedy that shocked me,” said a Lebanese Civil Defense member from nearby Tebnine, who asked Al Jazeera to withhold his name for fear of reprisals. “I knew them, they were all my friends,” he said, adding that while they were not from the same organisation, there was coordination between them.

Directly targeting rescue workers or medical staff is against international humanitarian law and could amount to a war crime under the Geneva Conventions which Israel has ratified along with 195 other countries. Since last October, at least 107 rescue workers have been killed by Israeli attacks, according to the Ministry of Public Health, with many in Lebanon expressing anger over Israel’s lack of accountability.

Israel’s Arabic language spokesperson has repeatedly claimed that Israel does not target civilians or rescue workers, and that the strikes have focused solely on “Hezbollah terrorist targets.” However, Mahmoud Karaki, a spokesman for the Islamic Health Committee rescue unit, told Al Jazeera that 18 of the committee’s centres have been “directly targeted” by Israel in the past year.

“In all the centres that were targeted, there were no military targets next to them, or in them. The Israeli enemy always looks to find an excuse but it’s not true,” Karaki said. The civil defence worker from Tebnine, a 30-minute drive from the southern border, said the increase in violence over the last couple of weeks had shaken him to his core.

“Listen to me, they targeted the Red Cross, civil defence and the fire brigade,” he told Al Jazeera, speaking at a frantic pace.

“They targeted Al-Risala and the Islamic Health Committee, meaning they can target anything without accountability ... they are not afraid [of repercussions].”

Al-Risala and Islamic Health Committee are healthcare services affiliated with Lebanese political parties Haraket Amal and Hezbollah, respectively. “I’ve been working for a year,” he said. “But now ... I swear to God, it’s suicide. If there’s a fire ... you’re going out there to kill yourself, not put it out, because it’s possible that a plane will strike you.”

Lebanese conflict researcher Ahmad Baydoun told Al Jazeera that often after a strike, Israel will use its firepower to make sure help stays far away. “[Israel] won’t let people go to specific sites,” Baydoun said. “They want to make sure everyone there is dead.”

Last Friday, a video went viral of an excavator operator in Beirut’s southern suburbs being hit by an Israeli air strike. In the 22-second video, a man is seen sitting inside the excavator cabin, pointing his camera downward towards the bucket. A buzzing noise is followed by an explosion and the camera shakes and jerks upward, dust rising all around. After a one-second pause, a man starts screaming, while another asks frantically: “What happened?” In another video of the same incident from a different angle, a man screams on the ground as another says: “A rocket hit us!”

Baydoun said he had geolocated both videos to the location of an attack on assassinated Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah’s possible successor, the Hezbollah Executive Council head, Hachem Safieddine. Safieddine has been missing since a violent Israeli air strike rocked Beirut on Thursday. Israel’s Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said Safieddine was likely killed in that attack.

Hezbollah told Reuters that Israel was blocking search and rescue efforts to find Safieddine – and that would include civilians and rescue workers.

“We have no information other than that this is part of the attacks on civilians,” Ali Tfayli, a Hezbollah spokesperson told Al Jazeera. “The Israelis made a decision to leave the suburb empty so they can do whatever they want.”

The latest bombardments are leading many rescue workers to now reassess their priorities. “Citizens have the right to ask the Lebanese state for help,” Walid Hashash, 58, director-general of the civil defence in Beirut, told Al Jazeera. “But at some point, we have to protect our lives.”

On September 23, Israel expanded its conflict against Hezbollah by bombarding southern Beirut and other Hezbollah strongholds in Lebanon with deadly air strikes. Hezbollah and Israel have been trading cross-border attacks since October 8, 2023, with Israel killing nearly 2,100 people in Lebanon since. However, 1,250 of those deaths happened since September 23, more than in the entire monthlong war of 2006 between Hezbollah and Israel.

Most of the deaths before then were Hezbollah members, but in recent weeks, the death toll has spiked as civilians – including rescue workers and medics – increasingly come under Israeli fire. During the first 11 months of the war, Israel’s attacks on Lebanon were confined mostly to southern Lebanon and parts of the Bekaa Valley in the east and northeast.

But on September 23, 2024, Israel intensified attacks on both areas, killing more than 550 people in a single day. On September 27, Israel assassinated Nasrallah in a devastating attack that took down at least six buildings in Haret Hreik, a neighbourhood in Beirut’s densely populated southern suburbs and a few hours later began ordering the evacuation of certain parts of the suburbs.

Since the escalation on September 23, about a quarter of Lebanon’s population – or 1.2 million people – have been displaced and the daily news in Lebanon is filled with images of shops and homes turned to dust and rubble.

Until September 23, “it was a bit more dangerous in south Lebanon”, Karaki told Al Jazeera. “But today, there’s no difference. It’s equally dangerous everywhere.” Meanwhile, in southern Lebanon, the village of Meiss el-Jabal was one of the worst affected by air attacks over the past year. On October 6, it faced more than 40 raids by the Israeli Air Force in just four hours. Only a few people remained in the village, most of them elderly or sick and the civil defence once provided aid and treatment for them. But there has been no communication for a week.

“Nobody knows anything about their situation,” the civil defense member from Tebnine said. “Maybe they died in the raids.”

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