

Israeli forces again target UN peacekeepers in southern Lebanon

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**A UN peacekeeper of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) stands at his post in the village of Markaba, near the border with Israel, southern Lebanon
REUTERS/Aziz Taher**

Beirut, October 11 (RHC)-- A new Israeli attack has wounded United Nations peacekeepers in southern Lebanon, in the second such hit in as many days. On Friday, Lebanon's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said the Israeli army hit a watchtower of a Sri Lankan battalion in Naqoura, part of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

Artillery shelling from an Israeli Merkava tank wounded members of the battalion, Lebanon's official National News Agency reported.

Speaking at a news conference in Beirut, Lebanese caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati said the attack was a "denounced crime". He added that he had discussed efforts to reach a ceasefire in Lebanon with United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Friday said it was "very clear that this incident is intolerable and cannot be repeated".

Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Friday said it was "outraged" by the attack on UNIFIL peacekeepers and demanded that Israel refrain from any "hostile actions" against them.

Human Rights Watch called for a UN inquiry into the attacks and said the deliberate targeting of UN missions is a "war crime."

"UN peacekeepers in south Lebanon have long played a critical civilian protection and humanitarian role," said Lama Fakih, Middle East and North Africa director at the New York-based rights group. "Any targeting of UN peacekeepers by Israeli forces violates the laws of war and dangerously interferes with UNIFIL's civilian protection and aid work."

China expressed "grave concern and strong condemnation" of Israel's attacks on UN peace operations, as did India over the "deteriorating security situation along the Blue Line." India's Ministry of External Affairs said: "Inviolability of UN premises must be respected by all and appropriate measures taken to ensure the safety of UN peacekeepers and the sanctity of their mandate."

The attack comes a day after UN peacekeepers said the Israeli military "repeatedly" fired at UNIFIL headquarters and positions in southern Lebanon. Two Indonesian peacekeepers were injured and remained in hospital, the mission said.

UNIFIL personnel wear blue helmets to be clearly identifiable and their position is regularly communicated to the Israeli military. Israel acknowledged its forces had opened fire in the area, saying the Hezbollah fighters on whom it is waging war operate near UN posts.

The attack on Thursday prompted global condemnation.

Italian Defence Minister Guido Crosetto denounced the incident as a possible war crime, in a break from his country's support for Israel throughout its yearlong war in Gaza and Lebanon.

"This was not a mistake and not an accident," Crosetto told a news conference. "It could constitute a war crime and represented a very serious violation of international humanitarian law."

UNIFIL spokesman Andrea Tenenti told Al Jazeera the attack was a "very serious" development. He explained that Israel had previously asked the peacekeepers to move from "certain positions" near the border, but "we decided to stay because it's important for the UN flag to fly in [the] south of Lebanon.

"At the moment, we are staying, we are trying to do whatever we can to monitor [and] to provide assistance," Tenenti added.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi confirmed the country's peacekeepers were in hospital for further observation.

“Indonesia strongly condemns the attack,” she said. “Attacking UN personnel and property is a major violation of international humanitarian law.”

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