

UNIFIL says Israeli tank fired at peacekeepers watchtower in Lebanon

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A joint force from UNIFIL and the Lebanese army in Naqoura near the Israeli border (File - AFP)

United Nations, October 17 (RHC)--UN peacekeepers in southern Lebanon say Israeli forces have fired at one of their positions in the south in a “direct and apparently deliberate” attack that damaged a watchtower.

The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) said on Wednesday its peacekeepers near southern Lebanon’s Kfar Kila observed an Israeli Merkava tank “firing at their watchtower” -- adding that “two cameras were destroyed, and the tower was damaged”.

The incident is the latest in a series of Israeli attacks and violations against peacekeepers in Lebanon and comes as Israel expands its bombardment and ground attacks on the country, killing hundreds of people and displacing nearly a quarter of the population.

On Sunday, UNIFIL said Israeli troops “forcibly entered” a UNIFIL position near the village of Ramyah, crossing the UN-mandated Blue Line, the de facto border between Israel and Lebanon, with two tanks. Israeli troops later fired smoke rounds near peacekeepers, leaving 15 personnel suffering from skin irritation and gastrointestinal issues.

UNIFIL also reported that Israeli troops obstructed a critical logistical movement near Meiss el-Jabal on Saturday. “We remind the IDF and all actors of their obligations to ensure the safety and security of UN personnel and property and to respect the inviolability of UN premises at all times,” the peacekeeping mission said.

The Israeli government has demanded that UNIFIL leave its positions in southern Lebanon, claiming the Lebanese armed group Hezbollah is using peacekeepers as “human shields,” but the peacekeeping force has refused to do so.

Hezbollah denies Israel’s accusation that it uses the proximity of peacekeepers to protect its fighters.

Israeli ground troops, which entered southern Lebanon more than two weeks ago, have been battling Hezbollah in the area. Backed by warplanes, Israeli forces have continued to attack towns and villages. At least 16 people were killed in an Israeli strike on a municipal building in Nabatieh on Wednesday.

The UN Security Council has urged Israel to protect peacekeepers and their positions amid widespread international condemnation of the attacks. UNIFIL consists of some 10,000 peacekeepers from more than 50 countries, including Indonesia, India, and Ireland.

On Wednesday, 16 EU countries that contribute soldiers to the UN’s peacekeeping mission called for revised rules of engagement in Lebanon, saying they need to be more effective in light of recent attacks.

“The message we want to send to Israel is that if you stop your army, the UN can also change its approach in that part of Lebanon, so that we can peacefully achieve what you’re now trying to do by attacking Hezbollah’s bases militarily,” Italian Defence Minister Guido Crosetto told Italian public broadcaster RAI.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has expressed “particularly grave concerns” over Israel’s recent attacks on UN peacekeepers in Lebanon. “We are extremely concerned by the dangerous escalation in Lebanon, affirm our support for the Lebanese people,” the GCC said in a joint statement with the EU following a summit in Brussels.

Meanwhile, Lebanon's crisis response unit said 27 people have been killed and 185 wounded in the past 24 hours, the Lebanese Health Ministry said on Wednesday.

At least 2,367 people have been killed in Israel's attacks on Lebanon, and 11,109 wounded, since October 8, 2023, the ministry said.

The crisis response unit recorded 138 airstrikes and shellings in the past day, mostly in southern Lebanon, the southern suburbs of Beirut and the Bekaa Valley.

Separately, two Lebanese Red Cross paramedics were injured by shrapnel while looking for wounded people after an attack on the town of Jouaiya in southern Lebanon.

The Lebanese Red Cross posted on the social platform X that two of its ambulances, in coordination with UN peacekeepers, arrived in Jouaiya on Wednesday afternoon following an Israeli raid.

As the paramedics began searching for casualties, the area was targeted again, leaving two paramedics with minor shrapnel wounds. Both were taken to Jabal Amel Hospital "and their condition is not worrisome," the group said.

Four Lebanese Red Cross volunteers were also wounded in a strike Sunday while responding to an attack in Serbine, a village in the Nabatieh governorate.

According to the Health Ministry, over 100 paramedics have been killed by Israeli airstrikes since October 8 and more than 220 have been injured. The strikes have also destroyed 128 ambulances and fire trucks and damaged at least 10 hospitals and 45 medical centers.

Al Jazeera correspondent Ali Hashem says Israel's systematic destruction of Lebanese towns near their shared border indicates that it is trying to make the area uninhabitable. "In the south, we saw pictures of Israel detonating a whole village, the village of Mhaibib, that's just on the border," he reported from Beirut.

"That gives an indication that there is an attempt to make the border villages unlivable so that people won't get back there even if there is a settlement or an end to the hostilities between the two sides."

[SOURCE: AL JAZEERA and NEWS AGENCIES]

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