

Eight wounded in new attack on UNIFIL peacekeepers in Lebanon

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UNIFIL positions have come under attack at least 20 times since Israel's ground incursion in southern Lebanon began in early October [Karamallah Daher/Reuters]

Beirut, October 30 (RHC)-- The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) says eight of its peacekeepers were wounded after a rocket, likely fired by Hezbollah or an affiliated group, hit its headquarters in southern Lebanon.

“A rocket hit UNIFIL’s headquarters in Naqoura, setting a vehicle workshop on fire,” the force said in a statement on Tuesday, adding that it “was fired from north of UNIFIL’s headquarters, likely by Hezbollah or an affiliated group.”

Austria’s Federal Ministry of Defence said the attack injured eight Austrian soldiers with the force, condemning the attack and adding it was “currently not possible to say where the attack came from.”

“Eight Austrian army soldiers from the UNIFIL contingent were injured today at 12:58 pm [10:58 GMT] by a rocket hit in Camp Naqoura; none of them seriously,” the statement said.

The injuries were “minor and superficial,” with none of the soldiers, who are members of a repair platoon, requiring emergency medical attention, the statement added.

“We condemn this attack in the strongest possible terms and demand that the attack be investigated immediately,” Defense Minister Klaudia Tanner said in the statement. “All sides are called upon to immediately ensure the safety of all UN peacekeepers. It cannot and will not be tolerated that the UN peacekeepers are deliberately or inadvertently put in danger,” she added.

Austria contributes about 180 soldiers to the 10,000-strong force. They are part of a “Multi Role Logistic Unit” that performs roles like transporting goods and personnel, repairing vehicles, supplying fuel and firefighting.

UNIFIL has faced a series of attacks on its peacekeepers in recent weeks. The Israeli government has demanded that UNIFIL leave its positions in southern Lebanon, but the UN maintains that the mission is not going anywhere.

UNIFIL positions have come under attack at least 20 times since Israel’s ground incursion in Lebanon began in early October, including by direct fire and an incident on October 13 when two Israeli tanks burst through the gates of a UNIFIL base, according to the United Nations. Israeli forces have also fired on several front-line UNIFIL positions.

Israel and Hezbollah have been exchanging fire since the Lebanese armed group fired rockets towards Israel on October 8, 2023, in what it said was “solidarity” with Palestinians in Gaza. Israel’s military drastically escalated the conflict last month, killing much of the group’s leadership, unleashing a relentless bombardment across Lebanon and sending ground forces into the south of the country.

Israel has said it intends to dismantle the infrastructure of Hezbollah and end the cross-border attacks that have driven tens of thousands of people from their homes in northern Israel.

The attack on UN peacekeepers comes amid heavy ground fighting between Hezbollah fighters and Israeli soldiers in border areas after Israeli strikes on the eastern Bekaa Valley killed more than 60 people, according to Lebanese officials.

Many of those killed were in Baalbek province, according to Lebanon’s National News Agency. Baalbek Mayor Bachir Khodr described the strikes as “the most violent day in Baalbek since the beginning of the aggression”. In a post on X, he said people remained trapped under the rubble.

More than 2,700 Lebanese have been killed and 1.2 million others have been displaced since the escalation began. In a statement on Tuesday, the Israeli army claimed it destroyed a Hezbollah “command centre” and another bunker in which explosives were stored in southern Lebanon.

Hezbollah, meanwhile, said it fired rockets and artillery at Israeli forces southeast of the southern town of Khiam, the deepest the group has acknowledged Israeli forces operating in Lebanon since ground operations began. The group also announced that Naim Qassem will succeed slain leader Hassan Nasrallah as secretary-general of Hezbollah.

In a statement on Tuesday, Hezbollah said Qassem was elected due to his “adherence to the principles and goals of Hezbollah.” Ali Rizk, a Beirut-based security and political analyst, said the decision demonstrates the group is rebuilding after the killing of several top leaders.

“This would have the effect of boosting the morale somewhat of Hezbollah’s supporters. It would also be a message to Hezbollah’s enemies saying there is no leadership vacuum and everything is going smoothly and Hezbollah is rebuilding,” Rizk told Al Jazeera.

Israel’s UNRWA ban a ‘new level in war against UN,’ Palestinian envoy says
The Knesset passed a bill on Monday banning the UN agency for Palestine refugees from operating in Israel.

Israel’s move to ban the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) marks a “new level” in its war with the UN, the Palestinian envoy to the UN has said. The Israeli parliament or Knesset approved bills on Monday aimed at banning UNRWA from operating in Israel.

UNRWA supports Palestinian refugees in Gaza and the occupied West Bank, occupied East Jerusalem, as well as surrounding countries.

Palestinian envoy to the UN Riyad Mansour told the UN Security Council on Tuesday that the Knesset’s legislation to ban UNRWA “constitutes a new level in this war against the UN and an integral part of an all-out assault on the Palestinian people.” He noted how Israel had declared UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres “persona non grata” – and had killed, detained and tortured UN staff and UN peacekeepers.

UNRWA has provided essential aid, schooling, and healthcare across the Palestinian territory and to Palestinian refugees elsewhere for more than seven decades.

But since Israel’s war on Gaza began last October, the agency itself has suffered heavy losses, with at least 223 of its staff killed and two-thirds of its facilities in Gaza damaged or destroyed.

Danny Danon, Israel’s representative at the UN, told the Security Council that UNRWA in Gaza has become a front for Hamas, the Palestinian armed group.

Israeli authorities have long called for the agency to be dismantled, arguing that its mission is obsolete and it fosters anti-Israeli sentiment among its staff, in its schools and in its wider social mission. UNRWA strongly disputes this characterisation.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has in the past also called on the United States, Israel’s top ally and the agency’s biggest donor, to roll back its support.

UNRWA head Philippe Lazzarini called the vote by Israeli lawmakers a “dangerous precedent” and said that it was the latest in an ongoing campaign to discredit the agency and “delegitimise its role towards providing human development assistance and services to Palestine refugees”.

Israel’s decision to ban UNRWA would represent a form of collective punishment for Gaza’s people if fully implemented, UN humanitarian office spokesperson Jens Laerke said. Russia, China, Qatar, European countries and rights organisations around the world also condemned the vote in the Israeli parliament.

Reporting from UN headquarters in New York City, Al Jazeera's Gabriel Elizondo said dozens of countries have expressed support for UNRWA. "The UN secretary-general has said he is going to take this issue up with the General Assembly (GA). There is some movement behind the scenes in the GA to put sanctions against Israel," Elizondo added.

The Security Council session came as Israel continued its bombardment of Gaza, killing at least 115 people on Tuesday, including 109 in the north of the territory, according to Palestinian authorities.

"Israel has crossed every red line, broken every rule, defied every prohibition. When is enough really enough? When are you going to act? You are the Security Council. You have to reach every single one who is in pain among the Palestinians. That is your duty," Mansour said at the UN Security Council meeting.

"By ending impunity and ensuring accountability, by finally bringing to an end this terrible injustice, let your actions match your words. Stop this genocide or forever remain silent."

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