Israeli warplanes terrify residents in Lebanese capital of Beirut

Israeli warplanes terrify residents in Lebanese capital of Beirut

Beirut, January 23 (RHC)-- Over the last month, Israeli jets have carried out some of their biggest air raids yet in Syria, apparently striking Iranian targets. It may have been the Lebanese next door, though, who trembled with greater fear. Some took cover under a table or a sink, others hid in their cars.

The roar of low-flying jets flying in from the Mediterranean over Beirut is especially tormenting to those who experienced the August 4 port blast that left nearly 200 people dead, thousands injured, and hundreds of thousands homeless.

Rana al-Dirani's 10-year-old son shudders every time he hears an Israeli plane and wraps his arms around her. "He asks me: 'What is it, Mama – another explosion or is Israel bombing us?' He gets scared and so do I, but I have to be strong in front of him," said Rana. "I mean what do the Israelis want from us? Aren't we suffering enough?"

Rana's life has not escaped any of her country's many crises. She is a co-owner of an Arabic language school that became financially inoperable as the economy collapsed last year and the local currency devalued by more than 80 percent.

Then came the blast. Her school was barely 200 metres from the port and was fatally damaged in the explosion. Now she and her children are infected with the coronavirus. On top of all that, Israel's planes spark the memories of the blast and terrify her children.

Israeli jets were heard in Beirut days before the explosion, too, leading many to first suspect the country, which is still technically at war with Lebanon and has a mortal enemy in Hezbollah, was behind the explosion.

"I was so sure that the pre-port explosion sounds were jets, so now when I hear that sound I rationalise that this time it truly is jets," said Niamh, who runs Aaliyah's Books, a cafe in Gemmeyzye, which was among the worst-hit neighbourhoods in the explosion. "When I'm alone, especially if the sound is particularly loud, I'll decide to err on the side of safety and tuck myself under a sink or table, feeling irrational as I do so – but also calmer."

Rudeynah Baalbaky was celebrating with her friends on Christmas Eve in Dahiye, a suburb in southern Beirut and stronghold of Hezbollah, the Iran-backed political party and militia in Lebanon. When she heard the jets swish through the sky to bomb Masyaf, a city in northwestern Syria that is home to a military academy and a scientific research centre, she thought the bombs were intended for Hezbollah.

"I felt the raid [on Lebanon] was very imminent, very close. I hid in the car at that moment," said Rudeynah. "I spent the past few days in a state of panic, very worried about securing medicine for my mother and father."

Israel has been invading Lebanese airspace for more than 10 years. But as former US President Donald Trump lost the election in November and new President Joe Biden said he would rejoin the nuclear deal with Iran, Israel intensified bombings in Syria to inflict maximum damage on alleged Iranian shipments, which it says are intended to strengthen Hezbollah.

Sami Nader, a Lebanese political analyst, said while Israel could bomb these alleged shipments through Syrian airspace, it is easier to go through Lebanon. "Israel does not violate any bilateral agreement with any regional power if its planes invade Lebanese airspace, whereas in Syria it has an agreement with Russia and it's more complicated for them," Nader said.

"On the one hand Israel is violating Lebanese sovereignty," he added. "But on the other Lebanon has not adhered to its international commitments either, because according to the UN resolutions Hezbollah is supposed to be unarmed but it very much has its weapons."

Radio Habana Cuba