UN observers wounded in explosion while on patrol in southern Lebanon

Three UN observers and a translator were wounded while on patrol along the southern Lebanon border, the UN peacekeeping mission said [File: Hassan Ammar/AP Photo]

United Nations, March 30 (RHC)-- Three United Nations observers and one translator were wounded while patrolling the border in southern Lebanon when a shell exploded near them, the UN peacekeeping mission said.   The blast took place in Rmeish, a village along the Israeli-Lebanese border.

The targeting of peacekeepers is "unacceptable", the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), a peacekeeping force that helps monitor the Israel-Lebanon border, said in a statement on Saturday, adding that it was still investigating the origin of the blast. It said the "safety and security of UN personnel must be granted".

The Israeli military and the Iran-aligned Hezbollah, an ally of Hamas, have been exchanging near daily fire across the border since October when the current conflict in Gaza started. "All actors have a responsibility under international humanitarian law to ensure protection to non-combatants, including peacekeepers, journalists, medical personnel, and civilians," UNIFIL said. "We repeat our call for all actors to cease the current heavy exchanges of fire before more people are unnecessarily hurt."

Two security sources told the Reuters news agency that the observers were wounded in an Israeli strike, but the Israeli military denied targeting the area.   "Contrary to the reports, the [Israeli military] did not strike a UNIFIL vehicle in the area of Rmeish this morning," it said.

Reporting from Beirut, Al Jazeera's Zeina Khodr said the UN observers and translator were "close to the blue line, the border between Lebanon and Israel" on foot patrol when the explosion took place. The incident was "another dangerous development in a simmering conflict, which is now at its sixth month between Israel and Hezbollah", she said.

Lebanon's caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati spoke to UNIFIL commander Aroldo Lozaro, condemning the "targeting" of UN staff, according to a statement from his office.   Israel's shelling of Lebanon has killed nearly 270 Hezbollah fighters, but it has also killed about 50 civilians – including children, medics and journalists – and hit both UNIFIL and the Lebanese army.

In November, UNIFIL said one of its patrols was targeted by Israeli gunfire in southern Lebanon, but there were no casualties. UNIFIL last month said the Israeli military violated international law by firing on a group of clearly identifiable journalists, killing a Reuters journalist.

UNIFIL was set up in 1978 to monitor the withdrawal of Israeli forces after they invaded Lebanon in reprisal for a Palestinian attack.

It was bolstered after the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel in 2006, and its roughly 10,000 peacekeepers are tasked with monitoring the ceasefire between the two sides.

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