

Lebanon warns of new war as Israel launches fresh deadly strikes

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Beirut, March 22 (RHC)-- Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam has said his country is at risk of being drawn into a “new war”, as dozens of new Israeli air strikes against the Hezbollah armed group killed at least two people.

Salam issued the warning on Saturday, saying Israel’s “renewed military operations on the southern border” would bring “woes to Lebanon and the Lebanese people”.

Lebanon's National News Agency (NNA) reported that at least two people were confirmed killed and eight others injured by the Israeli air raids. Three of the victims, including one of those killed, were children, it said, citing the country's government-run Public Health Emergency Operation Center. The NNA report said at least 14 areas to the south were targeted by Israel.

Lebanon has blamed Israel for the protracted conflict, after failing to withdraw from all Lebanese territory since a ceasefire deal was declared in November last year. Under the deal, a January deadline was set for an Israeli withdrawal but was later extended to February 18. Since then, Israel has remained in five locations inside Lebanon, and has carried out dozens of deadly strikes against supposed Hezbollah targets.

On Saturday, Salam declared that "all security and military measures must be taken to show that Lebanon decides on matters of war and peace".

Earlier in the day, Israeli artillery and air strikes hit southern Lebanon, after its military claimed it had intercepted rockets fired from across the border. The reported exchange was the first since Israel abandoned a separate ceasefire in the Gaza Strip with Palestinian group Hamas.

In a separate statement, Lebanese President Joseph Aoun condemned "attempts" to destabilise his country and reignite violence, as he called for action to prevent further escalation of the conflict.

Israel has justified the latest attacks on Hezbollah, saying Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's order was "in response to the rocket fire at Israel this morning."

In a statement, Netanyahu said that he and Defence Minister Israel Katz instructed the Israeli military "to act forcefully against dozens of terror targets in Lebanon." Netanyahu said Israel was holding Lebanon's government responsible for "everything taking place within its territory".

The Israeli military said earlier it had intercepted three rockets launched from a Lebanese district about 6km (4 miles) north of the border. However, Hezbollah denied firing any rockets, calling Israel's accusations "pretexts for its continued attacks on Lebanon".

Al Jazeera's Zeina Khodr, reporting from Beirut, said there is "a lot of concern that the situation will spiral out of control." "What we understand is Lebanese officials are holding talks with the US-led committee monitoring the ceasefire to try to de-escalate tensions," she said.

The conflict in Lebanon marked the deadliest spillover of the Gaza war, rumbling across the border for months before escalating into a blistering Israeli offensive that wiped out Hezbollah's top commanders, many of its fighters and much of its arsenal.

The United Nations peacekeeping force in Lebanon, known as UNIFIL, said in a written statement on Saturday that it was "alarmed" by the border violence. "Any further escalation of this volatile situation could have serious consequences for the region," it said.

In an interview with Al Jazeera, political analyst Sultan Barakat of Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Doha warned that "as long as the [Israeli] occupation continues ... the resistance will continue".

[SOURCE: PRESS TV and REUTERS]



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