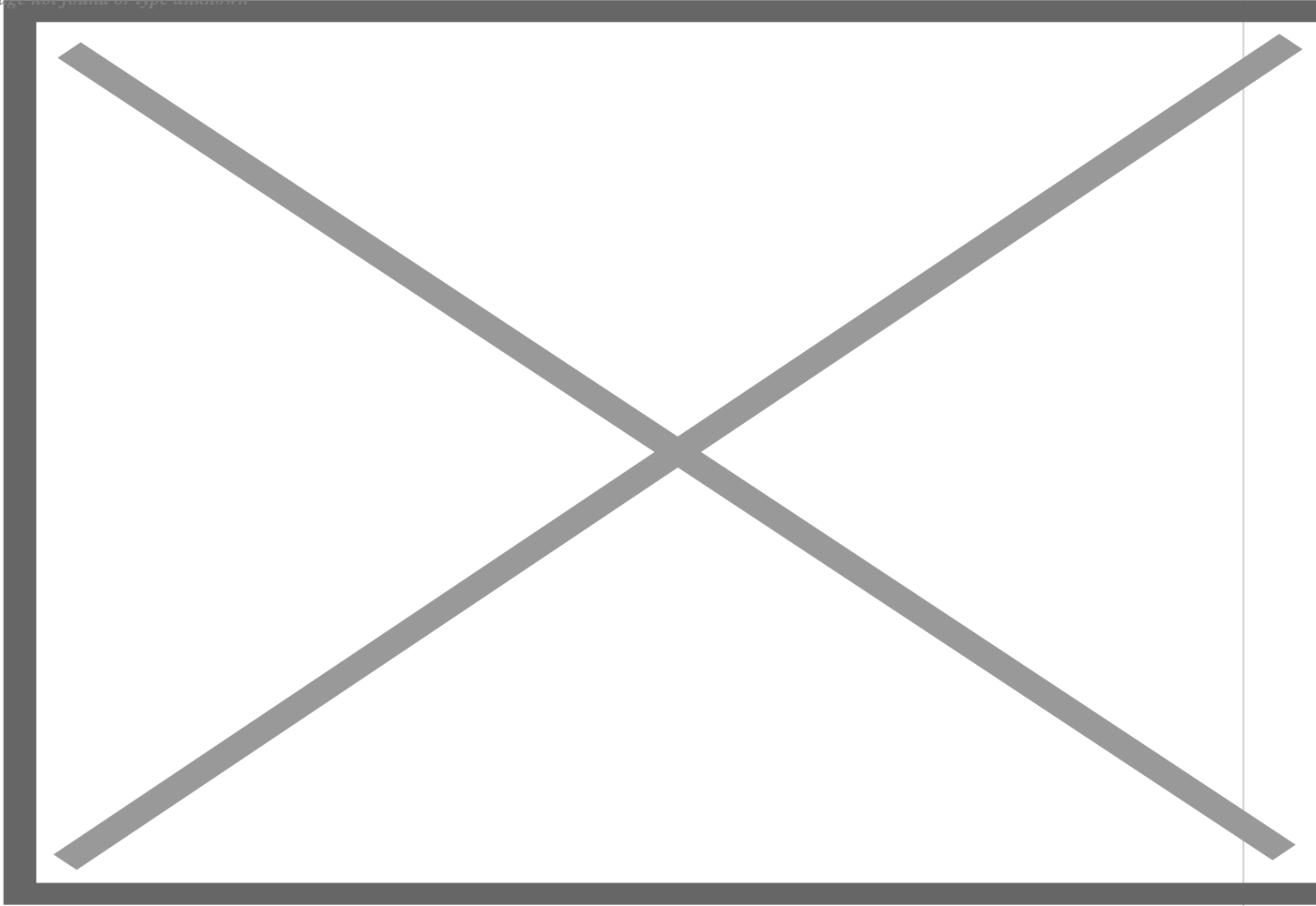


At least two killed in Israeli strikes on southern Lebanon

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Lebanese soldiers inspect the site near a burned-out vehicle reportedly hit by an Israeli strike in Ghaziyeh, near Sidon [Mahmoud Zayyat/AFP]

Beirut, April 20 (RHC)-- Lebanon's Health Ministry says two people have been killed in separate Israeli drone strikes in southern Lebanon, with Israel announcing that both of those killed were Hezbollah members.

One attack targeted a vehicle travelling on a road between the border villages of Aita ash-Shaab and Rmeish, while an attack earlier in the day struck a car south of the coastal city of Sidon.

“The attack carried out by the Israeli enemy against a car on the Sidon-Ghaziyyeh road resulted in one dead,” a Lebanese health ministry statement said on the fourth straight day of Israeli attacks in the south.

Despite a ceasefire last November that sought to halt more than a year of conflict between Israel and Iran-backed Hezbollah, Israel has continued to conduct near-daily strikes in Lebanon.

Israel’s military said it had “conducted a precise strike in the area of Sidon and eliminated the Hezbollah terrorist Muhammad Jaafar Mannah Asaad Abdallah.” It said Abdallah was “responsible, among other things, for the deployment of Hezbollah’s communication systems throughout Lebanon.”

On Friday evening, it announced “a Hezbollah terrorist was struck and eliminated by the IDF [military] in the area of” Aita al-Shaab. The Lebanese group has not yet commented on the killings.

An AFP journalist said the Israeli attack in Sidon hit a four-wheel-drive vehicle, sending a pillar of black smoke into the sky. At the scene of the strike, members of the security forces stood guard as a crowd gathered to look at the charred remains of the vehicle after firemen put out the blaze.

The Israeli military also said it was behind other attacks this week that it claimed had killed Hezbollah members. Hezbollah, significantly weakened by the war, says it is adhering to the November ceasefire, even as Israeli attacks persist.

The United Nations says at least 71 civilians have been killed by Israeli forces in Lebanon since the ceasefire. Thameen al-Kheetan, spokesperson for the UN Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said on Tuesday that the death toll included 14 women and nine children. He called for investigations into “each and every military action where civilians are killed.”

Under the November ceasefire, Israel was to withdraw all of its forces from south Lebanon and Hezbollah was to pull its fighters back north of Lebanon’s Litani River and dismantle any remaining military infrastructure in the south. But despite the deal, Israeli troops have remained at five south Lebanon positions that they deem “strategic”.

Lebanon’s army has been deploying in the south near the border in regions where Israeli forces pulled back. Lebanese President Joseph Aoun told Al Jazeera on Monday that the army was “dismantling tunnels and warehouses and confiscating weapons bases” south of the Litani “without any problem from Hezbollah”.

But on Friday, Hezbollah leader Naim Qassem said: “We will not let anyone disarm Hezbollah or disarm the resistance” against Israel. “We must cut this idea of disarmament from the dictionary,” he added in remarks on a Hezbollah-affiliated TV channel.

Earlier on Friday, another Hezbollah official said the group categorically refused to discuss handing over its weapons to Lebanon’s army unless Israel withdrew completely from the south and stopped its “aggression.”

“Wouldn’t it be logical for Israel to first withdraw, then release the prisoners, then cease its aggression ... and then we discuss a defensive strategy?” Wafiq Safa said in an interview with Hezbollah’s Al Nur radio station.

“The defensive strategy is about thinking about how to protect Lebanon, not preparing for the party to hand over its weapons.”

[SOURCE: AL JAZEERA and AFP]

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