

UN seeks to halt Hizbollah arms in Lebanon

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United Nations forces in Lebanon have stepped up joint patrols with the country's army to intercept shipments of heavy weapons by the terrorist group Hizbollah to the border regions with Israel.

Hizbollah's move to replace artillery and rocket stocks depleted in the 2006 war with Israel follows completion of its effort to rebuild its command and control across southern Lebanon.

The organisation is known to have restocked its strongholds north of the strategic Litani river with weapons from Iran and Syria.

But the presence of 3,500 troops of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (Unifil) has so far deterred movement of arms further south.

Officials said relations between Unifil, commanded by an Italian, Maj Gen Claudio Graziano, and Hizbollah deteriorated in recent weeks as the security forces cracked down on movements over the Litani's bridges.

Hizbollah mobilised volunteer units across southern Lebanon late last year in a move interpreted as a signal of intent to restore its fighting capacity to pre-war levels.

Reports in the aftermath of the war estimated that the organisation had lost half its weapons stockpile.

With Lebanon in the grips of a political crisis over its presidency, diplomats have expressed concern that Hizbollah is using its political position to distract attention from the expansion of its military power.

A Unifil spokesman said limiting the fallout from the struggle for power in Beirut was a key challenge. "We are observing closely the situation in the capital and the manoeuvres for president," said Andrea Tenenti.

"We are maintaining a high alert to make sure nothing changes in the south. It is true we haven't encountered any weapons so far but that is our task, to monitor and prevent any movements."

Lebanon has not had a president since Emile Lahoud resigned in November. The parliament has repeatedly postponed sessions to select a new head of state and major political factions show no signs of resolving a deadlock over powersharing.

The power struggle has not so far derailed co-operation between Unifil and the Lebanese Army, which now has offices in the UN headquarters and contributes troops to international operations.

Some Israeli officials have accused Unifil of failing to confront Hizbollah in the border region.

According to claims in Tel Aviv, Hizbollah mounts checkpoints, conducts training exercises and closely shadows Unifil's movements in the region.

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