

Israel issues travelers advisory, Qassem vows Mughniyeh reprisal

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Lebanese Anti-aircraft guns opened fire on 4 Israeli warplanes

BEIRUT: Israel's government warned its citizens to beware of possible attacks when they travel abroad, singling out threats by the Lebanese group Hezbollah. On February 12, 2008, a prominent Hezbollah military commander, Imad Mughniyeh, was killed in an explosion in Syria. Hezbollah blamed Israel and pledged revenge. Israel and Hezbollah fought a fierce month-long war in 2006.

In the advisory issued Sunday, the government tells Israelis to take precautions when they are abroad. These include avoiding most Islamic countries, rejecting tempting offers and unexpected gifts, turning down invitations to unexpected meetings and avoiding routines.

The government issued the advisory with the approach of the Passover holiday — a heavy travel period.

Over the weekend, Hezbollah's second-in-command Sheikh Naim Qassem said Hezbollah was still seeking revenge for the assassination of the party's top military commander Mughniyeh.

Qassem said that avenging Mughniyeh's death was "the minimum Hezbollah could do."

"Commitment [to avenge Mughniyeh] exists. The [attack] period and specifications, however, will come in due time," Qassem said.

Meanwhile, the head of Hezbollah's Loyalty to the Resistance parliamentary bloc MP Mohammad Raad told supporters in the southern town of Kfar Rouman Israel would never defeat the resistance, adding that threats of an imminent war were "merely empty words."

Raad advised the Lebanese to stand by the resistance and Lebanese Army in order to build a strong state.

Hezbollah held several rallies in south Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley provinces of Baalbek and Hermel to mark Mughniyeh's assassination. The party is planning a large rally to commemorate the assassination of its top military commander and two of its slain leaders Raghb Harb and Abbas al-Moussawi on Tuesday in its stronghold in Beirut's southern suburbs. Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah is expected to deliver a televised address for the occasion.

In other news, Lebanese anti-aircraft guns opened fire on four Israeli warplanes which were violating its airspace at low altitude on Sunday, the military said.

"The army's anti-aircraft guns fired at four Israeli warplanes overflying southern Lebanon, Hasbaya, the Shouf and the Bekaa," all in southeastern Lebanon, an army statement said.

The incident comes amid heightened concern in Lebanon over recent threats by the Israeli state against Hezbollah and its ally Syria.

Prime Minister Saad Hariri described Israeli military activity as "escalating" and "really dangerous" in a BBC interview broadcast Wednesday.

"During the past two months, every day we have Israeli planes entering Lebanese airspace," Hariri said.

Israeli officials have warned repeatedly in recent weeks that any attack by Hezbollah will spark a tough response, and have been locked in a war of words with Syrian leaders.

Israeli Premier Benjamin Netanyahu has sought to ease tensions, saying Israel wants peace with all of its neighbors.

But earlier this month Netanyahu accused Beirut of allowing Hezbollah to smuggle weapons into Lebanon in "blatant violation" of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended a 2006 war between Israel and the Shiite party.

Israel's regular overflights into southern Lebanon, a Hezbollah stronghold, are also a breach of Resolution 1701.

But Israel argues the overflights are necessary to monitor what it claims is massive arms smuggling by Hizbullah.

While Lebanon's army publishes almost daily reports of Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace, the military rarely opens fire unless the planes fly within range of its guns. — The Daily Star, with AP, AFP, and additional reporting by Mohammed Zaatari

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