

## Roadside bomb jolts UNIFIL, Lebanese

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SIDON: Six Italian peacekeepers were wounded Friday, two seriously, in a roadside bomb attack on their vehicle near Sidon, prompting Rome to announce a gradual reduction of its UNIFIL contingent.

UNIFIL forces elevated their alert status to "yellow" amid fears of further attacks after the blast, which was widely condemned by politicians from across the spectrum in Lebanon, ripped into the vehicle on the coastal road near the town of Rmeileh at around 4 p.m., also wounding two Lebanese bystanders.

In the wake of the attack, Italy will "gradually" reduce its peacekeeping presence in Lebanon, according to Foreign Minister Franco Frattini.

"We plan to do it, we will find the right way, which can't be from one day to the next but can only be a gradual reduction," Frattini said in comments confirmed by his spokesman, when asked if Italy would reduce its 1,780-member contingent.

No claim of responsibility has been issued for the blast.

Italy's ambassador to Lebanon, Giuseppe Morabito, said "this cowardly terrorist attack calls for a global and strong condemnation from all political Lebanese forces who believe in peace, stability and democracy."

Morabito visited the Italian wounded at Hammoud Hospital in Sidon, where the most seriously injured of the six was said to be in stable condition after undergoing three operations.

For his part, President Michel Sleiman described the attack as a criminal act meant to destabilize the country, while Speaker Nabih Berri also voiced his concern.

"We condemn this terrorist crime, as we offer our condolences to the UNIFIL leadership and especially the Italian unit, hoping for the speedy recovery of those wounded," Berri said.

Meanwhile, caretaker Prime Minister Saad Hariri warned of any attempts to use Lebanese territory "to send messages to the international community and specifically to UNIFIL in south Lebanon."

"We hope that the international forces resume their work according to [United Nations Security Council Resolution] 1701. The Lebanese government considers [the resolution] a basic rule for preserving stability and preventing violence in the area," Hariri said in a statement. Resolution 1701 was drafted to end the 2006 war between Lebanon and Israel.

UNIFIL's peacekeeping presence was beefed up in the wake of the conflict and is mandated with maintaining a cessation of hostilities, as well as monitoring the implementation of 1701.

Prime Minister-designate Najib Mikati also condemned the incident, praising the U.N. for preserving stability and security in the south. Mikati's remarks came during a telephone conversation with U.N. Special Coordinator for Lebanon Michael Williams.

UNIFIL has around 12,000 troops and naval personnel in Lebanon after its expansion under Resolution 1701.

The attack was the first since January 2008, when a roadside bomb struck a U.N. vehicle traveling along the same coastal highway, lightly wounding two peacekeepers. The deadliest recent attack was in June 2007, when six Spanish peacekeepers were killed after a bomb hit their armored personnel carrier near the Israeli border.

Two Lebanese civilians, Tannous Tanious and Amine Dawoud, who were standing about 50 meters away from the location of the blast were also slightly wounded, a security source said.

UNIFIL sources told The Daily Star that peacekeeping troops had elevated their alert status to yellow, stepping up security measures at various posts and facilities while reducing UNIFIL movements to a minimum.

The blast was condemned by Lebanese MPs and politicians from both sides of the political divide, while Hezbollah issued a statement urging the authorities to investigate and punish the "criminal act";

The attack came few hours after UNIFIL commemorated the International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers, remembering colleagues who lost their lives in the line of duty and celebrating their contributions to peace.

A ceremony was held earlier Friday at UNIFIL headquarters in Naqoura to mark the international day that is observed every year on May 29. Peacekeepers representing UNIFIL's 35 different national contingents were joined by local authorities, officers of the Lebanese armed and security forces and diplomatic representatives.

UNIFIL Acting Force Commander Brigadier-General Santi Bonfanti, and Brigadier-General Emile Salloum representing the Lebanese Army commander, laid wreaths at the UNIFIL Cenotaph in honor of the peacekeepers who lost their lives in the service of peace.

A minute of silence was observed. There have been 292 fatalities of peacekeepers serving with UNIFIL since its establishment in 1978.

"I pay tribute to you all peacekeepers — men and women, civilian and military, who serve selflessly, tirelessly and courageously in UNIFIL every day. Your work is a source of pride for the United Nations every day of the year," Brigadier-General Bonfanti said at the ceremony.

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