

Deterrent ability recovered after strike on Syria; Nuclear rumors may be prelude to US attack

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JERUSALEM (Agencies): Israel boasted on Sunday it has recovered its "deterrent capability" after an air strike in Syria triggered warnings of retaliation and intense media speculation over the aim of the operation. "The new situation affects the entire region, including Iran and Syria," military intelligence chief Amos Yadlin told parliament's powerful foreign affairs and defence committee, local media reported. In keeping with an official Israeli wall of silence on the event, Yadlin told lawmakers he would not address the incident directly, but his statements "alluded to the Israeli raid," public radio reported. He said Israel had now recovered its "deterrent capability" following the 2006 war against Lebanon's Hezbollah. Syria angrily denied as US "lies" suggestions that it was receiving nuclear material from North Korea, after foreign media reports that Israel's warplanes could have been targeting a possible joint nuclear project. Damascus said its air defences fired on Israeli warplanes which had dropped munitions deep inside its territory in the early hours of September 6, and it has protested to the UN Security Council.

Tsahi Hanegbi, head of the Israeli foreign affairs and defence committee, earlier said the government has adopted a policy of silence over the incident to ease tensions, but was taking Syrian threats of retaliation seriously. "We have to show restraint and it is in our interest to say nothing... This policy has proven itself. The tensions have slightly eased since 12 days ago. The more we bite our tongue, the better it will go," he told public radio. He said the tensions with Syria were a direct result of the bloody war between Israel and the Shiite Muslim militia Hezbollah in Lebanon last year that was regarded by many in Israel as a failure. "The Syrians had the impression that we were in a state of weakness and they threw themselves into an unprecedented campaign of arms purchases," Hanegbi said. Amid the silence from both Israel and Syria over the incident, alleged details of the strike have come in foreign media reports quoting anonymous officials, with two leading hypotheses emerging.

Meanwhile, US intimations of Syrian nuclear cooperation with North Korea might be a prelude to an attack on Syria, a state-run newspaper said Sunday.

The comment published in an editorial in one of the largest state-owned dailies, al-Thawra, came two days after a senior US nuclear official said the North Koreans were in Syria and that Damascus may have had contacts with "secret suppliers" to obtain nuclear equipment. Al-Thawra predicted Sunday there more accusations could well be on their way. "The magnitude of these false accusations might be a prelude to a new aggression against Syria," al-Thawra daily said. The newspaper called the suggestions of atomic cooperation "a flagrant lie" and said Syria has repeatedly asked the international community to disarm Israel of its nuclear weapons and called for a Middle East free of all weapons of mass destruction. Andrew Semmel, acting deputy assistant secretary of state for nuclear nonproliferation policy, was responding Friday to questions about an Israeli airstrike in northern Syria earlier this month. Neither side has explained what exactly happened, but a US government official confirmed that Israeli warplanes were targeting weapons from Iran and destined for Hezbollah militants in Lebanon, while other unnamed officials quoted in the American press suggested there was a nuclear aspect to the story. Syrian Information Minister Mohsen Bilal told the Saudi newspaper Asharq al-Awsat on Thursday that the accusations of North Korean nuclear help were a "new American spin to cover up" for Israel.

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