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ISRAEL/SOUTH LEBANON: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNS ATTACKS ON CIVILIANS

Following what appear to have been direct or indiscriminate attacks on civilians by the Israeli military over the past few days in South Lebanon, Amnesty International today called on the Israeli Government to immediately cease any such acts.

“The Israeli authorities’ declaration that parts of Lebanon are a free fire zone is tantamount to a death threat against almost half a million civilians,” Pierre Sané, Amnesty International’s Secretary General, said in Washington today.

“In what is becoming a major humanitarian crisis, innocent people are being punished in a massive reprisal for attacks on Israeli civilians by Hizbullah.”

Amnesty International also condemns the attacks by Hizbullah but believes that reprisals do not necessarily act as a deterrent to more violence and often only escalate it further.

Members of the human rights movement worldwide are appealing to both the Israeli Government and Hizbullah to stop such attacks, which are not allowed under international law, and are lobbying governments such as the USA, Iran, France and Syria to use their influence to ensure respect for basic humanitarian law in Lebanon.

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STOP PRESS: Amnesty International is monitoring closely the debate at the United Nations Security Council in New York with the hope that the international community will exercise its moral authority to protect human rights in the Lebanon.  
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BACKGROUND

Since 11 April the Israeli Defence Force has been bombarding an ever-increasing area of South Lebanon. Helicopters and warplanes have rocketed or bombed southern Lebanon, the suburbs of Beirut, and the Bekaa valley. On 15 April radio broadcasts from the “Voice of the South” (a radio owned by the South Lebanese Army, SLA, Israel’s ally in South Lebanon) called on Lebanese to leave towns and villages south of the Litani River. The area contains three major towns and around 90 villages. About 400,000 people are reported to have left and are travelling northwards.

The latest count of Lebanese victims is around 30 civilians killed and at least 140 wounded. About 40 Israeli civilians in towns near the Lebanese border have been wounded by Katyusha rockets fired by Hizbullah over the last four days.

Two ambulances run by the Islamic Scouts, an Islamist charity organization from South Lebanon, have been hit by rockets fired from helicopters. In one, hit on Saturday 13 April, four children and two adults, apparently fleeing the area were killed. Another ambulance was hit on Sunday, 14 April, wounding four passengers. Military casualties have included one Lebanese soldier killed and one Israeli soldier reportedly wounded; one member of the Hizbullah forces is known to have been killed.

Statements made by Israeli spokespersons suggest that terrorising the civilian population is a deliberate aim of recent attacks. On 11 April, Major General Amiram Levine, in command of Israeli forces in Lebanon, is reported to have said: "Residents of South Lebanon who are under the authority of Hizbullah will be hit harder". Ori Orr, the Israeli Deputy Minister of Defence said that Beirut "must understand that it cannot be calm there and less calm in Qiryat Shemona". An army spokesman stated on 15 April that : "Anyone remaining in Tyre or its 40 villages after this hour is solely responsible for endangering his life"

Amnesty International's worldwide membership is appealing to both Israel and Hizbullah to ensure that civilians are not victims of deliberate or indiscriminate attacks.

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