

Iran warns will defend itself after Israeli strikes

AFP – Iran warned on Saturday it would defend itself after Israeli air strikes killed at least four soldiers and further stoked fears of a full-scale war in the Middle East.

Israel warned Iran would “pay a heavy price” if it responded to the strikes, and the United States, Germany and Britain demanded Tehran not escalate the conflict further.

US President Joe Biden said he hoped “this is the end” after the pre-dawn Israeli strikes, noting that “it looks like they didn’t hit anything other than military targets”.

Biden had urged Israel to spare nuclear and oil facilities in its retaliatory strikes and the International Atomic Energy Agency confirmed that no nuclear sites were hit.

The European Union called for all parties to exercise utmost restraint to avoid an “uncontrollable escalation”.

Other countries, including many of Iran’s neighbours, condemned Israel’s strikes and some, such as Russia, urged both sides to show restraint and avoid what Moscow dubbed a “catastrophic scenario”.

Iran insisted it had the “right and the duty” to defend itself, while its Lebanese ally Hezbollah said it had already launched rocket salvos targeting five residential areas in northern Israel.

The Israeli army said 80 projectiles were fired across the border on Saturday.

Hezbollah later issued evacuation warnings for more than a dozen named locations in Israel, while the Israeli army made similar warnings for two neighbourhoods in southern Beirut.

Lebanon's official National News Agency reported early Sunday that Israel had carried out a fresh raid in Beirut's southern suburbs.

– 'Limited damage' –

Confirming its own strikes after explosions and anti-aircraft fire echoed around Tehran, the Israeli military said it had hit Iranian missile factories and military facilities in several provinces.

The "retaliatory strike has been completed and the mission was fulfilled", and Israeli aircraft "returned safely", a military spokesman said.

Iran confirmed Israel had targeted military sites around the capital and in other provinces, saying the raids caused "limited damage" but killed four soldiers.

Iran's armed forces general staff said only radar systems were damaged in the strikes and held back from any threat of immediate retaliation.

"While reserving its legal and legitimate right to respond at the appropriate moment, Iran is prioritising the establishment of a lasting ceasefire in Gaza and Lebanon," it said.

Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi held telephone talks with his Egyptian, Qatari and Syrian counterparts.

Qatar's Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, a key mediator in Gaza truce efforts, voiced "deep concern over the serious repercussions that may result from this escalation," his ministry said.

– Direct attack –

Israel had vowed to retaliate after October 1, when Iran fired around 200 missiles in only the second ever direct attack against its arch-foe. Most of those missiles were intercepted

but one person was killed.

The Israeli retaliation drew condemnation from Iraq, Pakistan, Syria and Saudi Arabia, which warned against further escalation. Jordan said Israeli jets had not used its airspace.

Turkey was one of the most outspoken critics, calling for an end to “terror created by Israel”.

Israel is already engaged in combat on two fronts.

Since last month, it has been fighting a war against Hezbollah in Lebanon, including strikes that have killed the group’s senior leadership and ground incursions seeking to destroy missile sites.

And, for more than a year since Hamas’s October 7, 2023 attack, Israel has been fighting a war in Gaza that has caused mass civilian casualties in the densely populated Palestinian territory.

The United Nations has warned the “darkest moment” of that conflict was unfolding, with Palestinians facing a dire humanitarian crisis and daily Israeli bombing.

– ‘True ally’ –

A defence official said there was “no US involvement” in the strikes on Iran, but afterwards Israeli President Isaac Herzog paid tribute to “our great friend the USA for being a true ally, and for the overt and covert cooperation”. He did not elaborate.

US National Security Council spokesman Sean Savett said Israel’s response was “an exercise in self-defence”.

He urged Iran to “cease its attacks on Israel so that this cycle of fighting can end without further escalation”.

The Israeli military has blamed "Iran and its proxies" in the region for "relentlessly attacking Israel since October 7", when Hamas attacked Israel, triggering the Gaza war.

That attack resulted in the deaths of 1,206 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally of Israeli official figures.

Dozens of hostages seized on that day are still held by militants in Gaza.

Israel's retaliatory bombardment and ground war in Gaza has killed 42,924 people, the majority civilians, according to figures from the Hamas-run territory's health ministry which the United Nations considers reliable.

In late September, Israel turned its focus to Lebanon, hitting Hezbollah targets and leaders and then sending in ground troops.

Israel says the aim is to make the north of its country safe for tens of thousands of displaced civilians to return.

At least 1,615 people have been killed in Lebanon since September 23, according to an AFP tally of Lebanese health ministry figures.

In April, in its first-ever direct assault against Israeli territory, Iran launched more than 300 drones and missiles.

Tehran said the barrage was retaliation for a strike on Iran's consular annexe in Damascus that killed commanders of its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Explosions later in April shook Iran's Isfahan province in what US officials, cited by American media, said was Israeli retaliation.

Iran said its October 1 missile attack on Israel was retaliation for an Israeli air raid that killed Hezbollah

chief Hassan Nasrallah, as well as the assassination in Tehran of Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh.

On Friday, Gaza's health ministry accused Israeli forces of storming the last functioning hospital in the territory's north in a raid it said left two children dead.

The Israeli military says it is seeking to destroy operational capabilities Hamas is trying to rebuild in the north.

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