One dead as Israel strikes Lebanon after cross-border rocket fire

AFP- Israel launched air strikes on Hezbollah strongholds in Lebanon on Saturday after intercepting cross-border rocket fire, with Lebanese state media reporting a woman was killed.

The Israeli army said three rockets were fired from Lebanon into northern Israel, setting off air raid sirens in the region for the first time since a November ceasefire between Israel and the Iran-backed Hezbollah.

Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam warned the country risked being dragged into a “new war” after months of relative calm.

The Israeli military said all three rockets were intercepted and there was no immediate claim of responsibility from any group.

But Israeli defence chiefs said they held the Lebanese government responsible for all hostile fire from its territory regardless of who launched it.

“We cannot allow fire from Lebanon on Galilee communities,” Defence Minister Israel Katz said, referring to towns and villages in the north, many of which were evacuated after Hezbollah began firing on Israel in support of Hamas in October 2023.

“The Lebanese government is responsible for attacks from its territory. I have ordered the military to respond accordingly,” Katz said.

“We promised security to Galilee communities, and that is exactly what will happen. Metula’s fate is the same as Beirut’s.”

Armed forces chief Eyal Zamir warned the military would “respond severely”.

“The state of Lebanon bears responsibility for upholding the agreement,” he said, referring to the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah which was signed by the government on the Lebanese side.

Lebanon’s official National News Agency said Israeli air strikes and shelling had targeted several areas of the south.

One Israeli strike killed a woman in Touline, the NNA reported, adding three other people were wounded in the southern town. It had earlier reported Israeli strikes wounded two people in the border village of Kfarkila.

– UN ‘alarm’ –

The UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon said it was “alarmed by the possible escalation of violence” following the morning’s rocket fire.

“Any further escalation of this volatile situation could have serious consequences for the region,” it said.

“We strongly urge all parties to avoid jeopardising the progress made, especially when civilian lives and the fragile stability observed in recent months are at risk.”

The Lebanese prime minister expressed concern at the flare-up.

“Salam warned against renewed military operations on the southern border, because of the risks they carry of dragging the country into a new war, which will bring woes to Lebanon and the Lebanese people,” his office said.

There was no immediate claim for the rocket fire on Israel.

Although Hezbollah launched the great majority of the rockets fired during the past two years, the Lebanese arm of

Palestinian militant group Hamas claimed some attacks.

Under the terms of the ceasefire, Hezbollah was supposed to pull its forces back north of the Litani River, some 30 kilometres (20 miles) from the Israeli border and dismantle any remaining military infrastructure in the south.

Israel has carried out repeated air strikes during the ceasefire that it said targeted Hezbollah military sites that violated the agreement.

The Lebanese army said it had dismantled three makeshift rocket batteries in an area north of the Litani on Saturday.

– Gaza assault enters day five –

Saturday's flare-up on the Lebanese border came as Israel's renewed offensive against Hamas militants in Gaza entered its fifth day.

Israel's resumption of military operations on Tuesday shattered the relative calm that had reigned since a January 19 ceasefire.

Israel's defence minister said Friday that he had ordered the army to "seize more territory in Gaza", which he would annex if Hamas failed to heed Israel's demands for the next steps in the Gaza ceasefire.

"The more Hamas refuses to free the hostages, the more territory it will lose, which will be annexed by Israel," Katz said.

The return to military operations was coordinated with US President Donald Trump's administration but drew widespread condemnation.

Hamas took issue Saturday with Washington's characterisation of its position, insisting that it stood ready to release all its remaining hostages as part of a promised second stage of

the ceasefire.

“The claim that ‘Hamas chose war instead of releasing the hostages’ is a distortion of the facts,” the group said.

When the first stage of the ceasefire expired early this month, Israel rejected negotiations for the promised second stage, calling instead for the return of all its remaining hostages under an extended first stage.

That would have meant delaying talks on a lasting ceasefire, and was rejected by Hamas as an attempt to renegotiate the original deal.

AFP