

Israel-Hamas war

Israeli civilians killed after rocket hits football field in Golan Heights

Hizbollah denies responsibility for deadliest attack on Israel since start of Gaza war



Israeli security and military officials respond after a rocket struck a soccer pitch in Majdal Shams © REUTERS

Neri Zilber in Tel Aviv and **Raya Jalabi** in Beirut JULY 27 2024

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At least eleven civilians were killed on Saturday after a rocket struck northern Israel, in the deadliest incident since hostilities began between the country and Lebanon-based Hizbollah last October.

The rocket struck a football pitch in the Druze town of Majdal Shams, in the occupied Golan Heights, where children and teenagers were congregating, according to Israeli health authorities. Twenty people were injured.

Daniel Hagari, Israel's chief military spokesperson, said it was the deadliest attack on Israeli civilians since Hamas's October 7 assault that triggered the war in Gaza.

“We witnessed great destruction when we arrived at the soccer field . . . the scene was gruesome,” said an Israeli first responder.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) blamed Iran-backed Hizbollah. “According to all our intelligence and assessments, this is a Hizbollah attack,” said an Israeli military official.

In an unusual move, Hizbollah denied responsibility for the strike. But the group controls southern Lebanon and has been trading cross-border fire with Israel for nearly 10 months.

Hizbollah “had absolutely nothing to do with the incident and categorically denies all false allegations in this regard,” the group said in a statement.

Hizbollah began to fire on northern Israel the day after Hamas militants attacked Israel from the Gaza Strip on October 7 last year, saying it was acting in solidarity with the Palestinian militant group.

The rocket that hit Majdal Shams was one of dozens of projectiles and drones fired from Lebanon into northern Israel on Saturday afternoon, according to Israeli officials. Hizbollah said it had targeted multiple Israeli military installations in north-eastern Israel and the Golan Heights in retaliation for Israeli air strikes on several Lebanese border villages earlier in the day.

One strike on the village of Kfar Kila, which Israel said was aimed at a “terrorist cell” and weapons storage facility, reportedly killed three Hizbollah members.

According to Israeli data, before Saturday’s attack 29 Israelis, including 11 civilians, had been killed in northern Israel since the start of the Gaza war.

More than 350 Hizbollah fighters, including some mid-to-high ranking officers and commanders, and more than 100 Lebanese civilians have been killed in the hostilities so far, according to an FT estimate.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was set to hold consultations with his security chiefs later on Saturday, according to his office. The premier, who is still in the US after last week addressing the US Congress and meeting President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris and ex-President Donald Trump, said he was seeking to return to Israel earlier than planned.

Despite months of rising hostilities, the tensions between Israel and Hizbollah have not yet escalated into an all-out war. Yet the conflict on the Israel-Lebanon frontier has displaced some 200,000 people.

The Lebanese militant group has vowed to continue its attacks until the war in Gaza ends. For their part, Israeli officials have said that they are committed to returning the residents of northern Israel back to their homes, either through US-backed diplomacy or via “other means,” as Netanyahu has put it.

Earlier on Saturday, around 30 people were killed in IDF air strikes which targeted a school in central Gaza housing displaced people, according to health authorities in the Hamas-run enclave.

The Israeli military said Hamas militants were using the Khadija school as a “hiding place to direct and plan . . . attacks” and to store weapons.

The attack came after the IDF announced it was further “adjusting” an Israeli-designated humanitarian “safe zone” in the southern Gaza city of Khan Younis, ahead of a planned offensive in the area. Last week Israel renewed operations in the city, shrinking the “safe zone” and calling on Gazans to evacuate to the nearby Al-Mawasi coastal strip.

“Remaining in this area has become dangerous,” the IDF said in a statement on Saturday.

Gaza ceasefire talks were set to resume on Sunday at a summit in Rome, with the participation of US CIA chief Bill Burns, the head of Israel’s Mossad David Barnea and Egyptian and Qatari officials.

Negotiations have stalled for several months due to fundamental gaps between Israel and Hamas. Israel on Saturday provided the US, Egyptian and Qatari mediators with an official response to the latest draft proposal, according to an Israeli official.

