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Israel/Lebanon: Hezbollah Attacks Endangered Civilians

UN Should Establish International Investigation into Israeli, Hezbollah Attacks
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(New York) – Hezbollah failed to take adequate precautions to protect civilians between September and November 2024, Human Rights Watch said today. Hezbollah used explosive weapons in populated areas in parts of northern Israel and failed to effectively warn civilians of attacks.

Human Rights Watch has previously documented a series of apparent war crimes and unlawful attacks by the Israeli military in Lebanon. Since the November 27, 2024 ceasefire deal, Israeli attacks have reportedly killed at least 59 people in Lebanon.



A destroyed structure in Metula, which became the site of heavy rocket barrages from Lebanon, amid cross-border hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel, November 18, 2024.

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“Deadly, unlawful attacks by the Israeli military in Lebanon don’t give Hezbollah a free pass to endanger civilians by firing explosive weapons into northern Israel,” said Adam Coogle, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. “An international investigation into Israel and Hezbollah’s compliance with the laws of war is a necessary step toward ensuring accountability for possible crimes.”

The Israeli military released data on October 6, 2024, that approximately 12,400 projectiles were fired toward Israel from Lebanon between October 7, 2023, and October 2, 2024. Munitions reportedly fired from Lebanon killed at least 30 civilians. A July 27 attack on the town of Majdal Shams, in the occupied Golan Heights, also killed 12 children. While Israel claimed that it was a Hezbollah rocket attack, Hezbollah has denied responsibility. Israeli strikes in the same period killed more than 4,000 people in Lebanon, according to Lebanon’s Health Ministry.

From mid-September until November 27, 2024, Hezbollah appeared to send rocket attacks deeper into northern Israel, beyond the “evacuation zone” along the border area, with some striking populated areas.

Hezbollah statements indicate attacks targeting Delton, Kfar Vradim, and Kiryat Shmona, among others, without specifying an intended military target. Some, such as Kiryat Shmona, contain military installations.

On October 26, Hezbollah's military wing issued an evacuation warning via Telegram, calling on residents of these and 22 other northern Israeli towns to immediately evacuate. Hezbollah said that the towns "have become a place of deployment and settlement for the enemy military forces attacking Lebanon [and] as a result have become legitimate military targets for the air and missile forces of the Islamic Resistance."

But warnings that do not give civilians adequate time to leave for a safer area would not be considered "effective" under international law. Broad warnings unrelated to any imminent attack cannot be considered "effective" and may instead improperly instill fear.

Between late September and November 2024, salvos of Hezbollah attacks killed at least 15 civilians and injured scores, based on data Human Rights Watch compiled from media reports. Some of the areas where civilians were killed were not subject to Hezbollah's October 26 evacuation warning.

One man described finding the body of his son, Omer, and four Thai agricultural workers after an October 31 Hezbollah attack on an apple orchard near Metula. "I came and saw the worst thing possible to see," he told Reuters. "I didn't think there was a 1 percent chance that one of us would be hurt, but actually, Omer paid the price."

Hezbollah's arsenal of missiles and rockets was widely understood by open-source military and security researchers before October 2023 to be primarily made up of large numbers of unguided surface-to-surface artillery rockets. In recent years, Hezbollah has asserted an ability to equip unguided rockets with guidance systems and in October 2024 released images of rockets with features consistent with that claim. There are no reliable or independent figures on the total quantity of rockets that may have been fitted with guidance systems. Human Rights Watch could not confirm whether guided rocket artillery was used in the attacks that killed civilians in northern Israel from September to November 2024.

Unguided artillery rockets cannot be accurately directed to a single target and are typically fired in salvos of multiple munitions. It is not possible for Hezbollah to aim its unguided artillery rockets with enough accuracy to target a particular building or fortification, but it could aim them at a town or even a neighborhood with some measure of accuracy.

Attacks that do not distinguish between military targets and civilians or civilian objects violate the laws of war. Human Rights Watch wrote to Hezbollah on January 29, 2025, requesting information about its strikes on northern Israel and any steps taken to minimize civilian harm but has not received a response.

Hezbollah's attacks brought daily life in much of northern Israel to a standstill, crippling economic activity and disrupting education for approximately 16,000 students. On October 16, 2023, the Israeli military ordered residents of 28 villages within approximately two kilometers of the border with Lebanon

to evacuate. The Israeli government later expanded the order, since which more than 60,000 civilians have been displaced.

According to the head of the northern district of Israel's Education Ministry, 16,000 students were evacuated from northern Israel and over 90 schools in the region were damaged from rocket fire or military activity. Two students from Katzrin told the Times of Israel that, for more than a year, "we studied in trailers, every time there was an alarm we were asked to go to an open space because there was no protection."

There has been significant infrastructural damage to some Israeli border villages and towns, based on media reports. More than 60 percent of the buildings in the border village of Metula have been destroyed, Agence France-Presse reported. The Associated Press reported that three-quarters of the structures in the border village of Manara were damaged during the war. The Times of Israel reported that 110 out of 155 buildings in Manara had been damaged, including to the electricity, sewage, and gas lines.

"There is nothing to return to," Galit Yousef, a resident of Metula who was evacuated from her home, told The Times of Israel. "My home was hit several times." Hagar Ehrlich, a Manara resident, told a Times of Israel reporter that "the damage on the kibbutz is unbelievable."

Human Rights Watch has previously documented a series of apparent war crimes and unlawful attacks by the Israeli military, including apparently deliberate attacks on journalists, peacekeepers, medics, and civilian objects, in addition to the unlawful use of booby-trapped devices and widespread use of white phosphorus, including unlawfully over populated residential areas. The more than 4,000 people killed between October 2023 and January 2025 include more than 316 children, 240 health and rescue workers, and 790 women.

According to Lebanon's Ministry of Public Health, at least 17,371 people were injured in attacks in Lebanon. More than a thousand Israeli strikes across Lebanon on September 23 killed 558 people in one day, according to Lebanon's Public Health Ministry. In subsequent weeks, more than one million people were displaced, thousands of buildings and houses were destroyed, and entire border villages were reduced to rubble. While the majority of those displaced have returned after a ceasefire deal came into effect, nearly 100,000 people remained displaced from their homes.

The United Nations should urgently establish, and UN member countries should support, an international investigation into the recent hostilities in Lebanon and northern Israel and ensure that it is dispatched immediately to gather information and make findings as to violations of international law and recommendations for accountability. The UN and UN member countries should ensure accountability and the documentation of abuses by all parties.

International humanitarian law, also known as the laws of war, requires parties to a conflict to take constant care during military operations to spare the civilian population and to "take all feasible precautions" to avoid or minimize the incidental loss of civilian life and damage to civilian objects. These

precautions include doing everything feasible to verify that the objects of attack are military objectives and not civilians or civilian objects, giving “effective advance warning” of attacks when circumstances permit, and refraining from an attack if the requirement for proportionality will be violated.

International humanitarian law requires all parties to distinguish between military objectives and civilians and civilian objects and to target only military objectives. Individuals who commit serious violations of the laws of war with criminal intent—that is, intentionally or recklessly—may be prosecuted for war crimes.

Israel and Lebanon should endorse the 2022 [Declaration on Protecting Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences of the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas](#). The use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas, including those fired in large groups or “salvos,” place civilians and civilian objects at grave risk and should be avoided.

“There’s little hope that the cycle of abuses will end while the culture of impunity drags on,” Coogler said. “States should ensure investigations of those responsible for violating international law and the laws of war.”

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