United Nations S/2004/572

Security Council

Distr.: General
21 July 2004

Original: English

Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (for the period from 21 January to 21 July 2004)

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1525 (2004) of 30 January 2004, by which the Council extended the mandate of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) for a further period of six months, until 31 July 2004. It covers developments since my previous report, dated 20 January 2004 (S/2004/50).

II. Situation in the area of operation

2. The situation in the UNIFIL area of operation during the reporting period was characterized by numerous armed encounters across the Blue Line, the majority of which were between Hezbollah and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and some of which involved unknown or Palestinian actors. Incidents tended to set off a chain of escalating exchanges, elevating tensions for periods of several days at a time. Air strikes and shooting incidents resulted in the deaths of one Israeli soldier, one Lebanese civilian and two Palestinians. Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace continued, and on at least two occasions Hezbollah directed anti-aircraft fire towards Israeli villages. While southern Lebanon maintained conditions of relative stability, as evidenced by the successful conduct of municipal elections, friction between the parties posed a threatening counterpoint.

3. The reporting period began with an Israeli air strike on two Hezbollah positions near Shaqra on 20 January in retaliation for a Hezbollah attack on 19 January, noted in my last report, that killed an Israeli soldier. On 24 February IDF fatally shot a Lebanese civilian, allegedly a drug smuggler, who had crossed into Israel near Ghajar.

4. Hostilities were renewed in the Shab'a farms area on 22 March. Early in the day, UNIFIL recorded eight Israeli air violations of the Blue Line. That evening, Hezbollah launched a heavy attack on IDF positions using rockets and mortars in the Shab'a farms and adjacent area. IDF retaliation in the vicinity of Shab'a and Kafr Shuba involved aerial bombs, mortars, artillery and small arms, with one mortar round landing close to a UNIFIL position. The following day, IDF used helicopter

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gunships to target armed elements preparing to fire rockets into Israel near Hula. Two members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) General Command were killed and one was wounded. Those incidents occurred in the days following the assassination in Gaza by IDF of Hamas leader Sheikh Yassin, and both Hezbollah and the PFLP General Command linked their actions to that event.

5. A cycle of disruptions and armed exchanges across the Blue Line commenced on 5 May. Israel carried out more than 20 air sorties over Lebanon, a number of which generated sonic booms. Hezbollah subsequently fired several anti-aircraft rounds from its positions near Shaqra, Hula and Alma ash Shab, with shrapnel landing near Shelomi. The Lebanese army responded also, firing anti-aircraft rounds from near Jezzin. IDF reacted with air strikes against two Hezbollah positions south-east of Tyre.

6. Less than 48 hours later, Hezbollah launched an attack on IDF positions in the Shab'a farms with heavy rocket, mortar and small-arms fire. IDF responded immediately with tank, mortar and artillery rounds and aerial bombs directed at Hezbollah positions from which the fire emanated. One IDF soldier was killed and five wounded by Hezbollah fire. Israel also fired three smoke rounds into a UNIFIL position. Lebanese authorities asserted that the Hezbollah fire had been preceded by an IDF foot patrol crossing the Blue Line. IDF claimed that the attack began with the explosion of a booby trap that had been planted by Hezbollah the night before on the perimeter of an IDF position. UNIFIL undertook an investigation but was unable to confirm or deny the claims of either party.

7. Another cycle of escalating events took place on 7 and 8 June. On 7 June, unidentified elements presumed likely to be Palestinians fired three to four rockets towards Israel from a location less than 500 metres from UNIFIL headquarters in Naqoura. Two of the rockets landed on Lebanese territory close to the Blue Line and one fell into the sea near an Israeli patrol boat. This incident was followed by upwards of 20 Israeli jets flying over southern Lebanon and close to Beirut. Later that night, the Israeli air force carried out an air strike on a Palestinian installation near Naameh, 15 kilometres south of Beirut, which was maintained by the PFLP General Command. No casualties were reported. IDF stated that the strike had been intended as retaliation for the rockets fired from Naqoura. It was the first Israeli attack in the vicinity of Beirut since IDF withdrew from Lebanon in May 2000.

8. The following day, Hezbollah again attacked IDF in the Shab'a farms area, claiming retaliation for the air strikes in Lebanon the day before. Hezbollah mortar rounds wounded an Israeli soldier. In response, IDF fired artillery, mortar and small arms rounds and one aerial bomb at Hezbollah positions in the general area of Kafr Shuba and Hebbariye.

9. Anti-aircraft fire was again a factor in an incident on 20 June, when Hezbollah fired three rounds across the Blue Line that left shrapnel near Shomera and inside a nearby IDF compound, causing no significant damage. That night Israeli jets dropped up to four bombs on a Hezbollah position near At Tiri. No casualties were reported. The Lebanese authorities insisted that the anti-aircraft fire had been preceded by Israeli air violations of the Blue Line, but none had been observed at the time by UNIFIL.

10. Israeli air incursions into Lebanon were on the whole less frequent than in the previous period, although they were notable for their intensity and the large number

of aircraft involved. Israeli officials maintained the position that there would be overflights whenever Israel deemed them necessary. As in the past, Israeli aircraft often penetrated deep into Lebanon, generating sonic booms over populated areas. The pattern identified in my previous reports continued, whereby some aircraft would fly out to sea and enter Lebanese airspace north of the UNIFIL area of operation, thus avoiding direct observation and verification by UNIFIL. The number of instances of Hezbollah anti-aircraft fire dropped significantly from the second half of 2003 to the first half of 2004. However the tit-for-tat pattern of fire in reaction to overflights appeared to resume in the last few weeks of the reporting period. On one occasion, on 29 June, Hezbollah fired heavy machine-gun rounds in the aftermath of an Israeli incursion involving 15 aircraft.

11. I and my senior representatives in the region, as well as concerned Member States, called repeatedly upon the Governments of Lebanon and Israel to cease all violations of the Blue Line and to refrain from actions carrying significant potential for escalation and threatening the stability of southern Lebanon. The parties on several occasions stated that they did not wish to see deterioration along the Blue Line, but the number of incidents that occurred clearly undermined those intentions.

12. There were no new instances of improvised explosive devices being planted along the line. However, one set of such devices remained in place on the Lebanese side of the line near United Nations position 1-21. UNIFIL recorded a number of minor ground violations of the line, primarily by Lebanese shepherds in the Shab'a farms and Ghajar area. Such violations became an almost daily routine, often involving the same local shepherds. The risk that they could lead to more serious incidents was demonstrated when, on several occasions, IDF fired shots in the air to warn the shepherds away. In a related development, IDF on four occasions fired small arms across the line at night in the Shab'a farms. UNIFIL asked IDF to cease both practices, and there have been no recent reports of such firings.

13. In separate occurrences, an Iranian and a Lebanese national were apprehended by IDF after having crossed the Blue Line. IDF turned them over to UNIFIL the next day, which in turn handed them over to the Lebanese authorities.

14. Demonstrators on the Lebanese side of the Blue Line gathered periodically at the points of friction identified in my previous reports, Sheikh Abbad Hill, east of Hula, and Fatima gate, west of Metulla. The number of demonstrations and the size of the crowds were small, with exceptions to the norm corresponding to significant regional developments or anniversaries. The protestors generally threw stones and other objects at IDF positions.

15. The first municipal elections in southern Lebanon since the Israeli withdrawal were held on 23 May. There was high voter turnout throughout the south, and polling was conducted in an orderly manner, with no reports of intimidation or major disturbances. The elections bolstered official local governing structures and marked an advance towards more thorough integration of the formerly occupied zone with the rest of the country. The vast majority of seats were won by Hezbollah and the other dominant political party in the south, Amal.

16. The Lebanese Joint Security Force and the Lebanese Army continued to operate in the areas vacated by Israel four years ago. The strength and activity of the Joint Security Force generally remained the same, apart from an increase in activities and a more visible presence in the second half of March and the beginning

of June, when regional and local tensions were heightened, as well as in May during the elections. The Force also intervened on several occasions to control demonstrations and took other measures to restrict access to the technical fence. Nevertheless, the Government of Lebanon continued to maintain the position that, so long as there was no comprehensive peace with Israel, Lebanese armed forces would not be deployed along the withdrawal line.

17. Under those circumstances, Hezbollah maintained its visible presence near the line through its network of mobile and fixed positions. On the whole, Hezbollah refrained from interfering with the freedom of movement of UNIFIL.

18. Early in the reporting period, the Government of Israel and Hezbollah concluded an agreement, brokered by German mediators, for a prisoner exchange, which took place on 29 and 30 January. UNIFIL provided logistical and security assistance to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) during the handover by Israel of remains of deceased prisoners through the Naqoura crossing.

19. In my last report, I referred to efforts to find a solution for the group of illegal Iraqi Kurd migrants who had been accommodated on a small plot of land between the Lebanese and Israeli gates at the crossing at Naqoura since August 2001. I regret to report that on 21 February a UNIFIL soldier from Ghana was accidentally shot during a scuffle initiated by the Kurds. On 12 March the Lebanese Internal Security Forces, monitored by UNIFIL, relocated the group to temporary accommodations near Saida in expectation of its prompt and voluntary repatriation. Repatriation was finally effected on 6 and 7 June by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in coordination with the Lebanese authorities and with the support of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, my Personal Representative and the International Organization for Migration.

20. UNIFIL provided assistance to the Lebanese civilian population in the form of medical care, water projects and equipment and services for schools and orphanages and supplied social services to the needy. UNIFIL assistance was provided from resources made available primarily by troop-contributing countries. UNIFIL cooperated closely on humanitarian matters with the Lebanese authorities, United Nations agencies, in particular the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia and the United Nations Children's Fund, ICRC and other organizations and agencies operating in Lebanon.

21. The presence of a large number of minefields in the UNIFIL area of operation, which are now largely concentrated along the Blue Line owing to comprehensive demining in other sectors, remained a matter of serious concern. Since January one infant had been killed and nine Lebanese civilians injured as a result of exploding mines and ordnance. UNIFIL continued with its operational demining activities, clearing over 800 mines and pieces of unexploded ordnance in an area of land measuring 15,000 square metres. UNIFIL also carried out regular mine-risk education for local schoolchildren.

22. Collaboration between the United Nations, the Government of Lebanon and various donors continued to yield impressive landmine clearance results in southern Lebanon. The National Demining Office obtained some additional IDF minefield maps, handed over as part of the prisoner exchange agreement. Most notably, Operation Emirates Solidarity, funded by the United Arab Emirates, was successfully completed on 29 May 2004. Overall, the project was responsible for the

location and destruction of some 60,000 landmines, resulting in the release back to the community of 5 million square metres of previously contaminated land within a two-year period.

23. My Personal Representative continued to work in close collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other United Nations agencies in advocating for socio-economic needs and facilitating the funding and implementation of development projects in the south. UNDP continued to lead the efforts of the United Nations system in working with the Lebanese authorities for the development and rehabilitation of the south.

III. Organizational matters

24. UNIFIL remained focused on maintaining the ceasefire through mobile and air patrols of its area of operation, observation from fixed positions and close contact with the parties, the latter with a view to correcting violations, resolving incidents and preventing escalation. The United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), through Observer Group Lebanon, supported UNIFIL in the fulfilment of its mandate.

25. As at 30 June 2004 UNIFIL comprised 1,991 troops, from France (205), Ghana (650), India (648), Ireland (6), Italy (52), Poland (238) and Ukraine (192). UNIFIL was assisted in its tasks by 51 UNTSO military observers. A map showing the current deployment of UNIFIL is attached. In addition, UNIFIL employed 405 civilian staff, of whom 111 had been recruited internationally and 294 locally. Major General Lalit Mohan Tewari ended his tour of duty as Force Commander, handing over command of UNIFIL to Major General Alain Pellegrini. Staffan de Mistura continued to act as my Personal Representative for southern Lebanon.

26. I regret to report the death of one member of the Force, a Ghanaian soldier who was killed in the line of duty. Since the establishment of UNIFIL, 245 members of the Force have lost their lives, 79 as a result of firings or bomb explosions, 104 as a result of accidents and 62 from other causes. Firings and mine explosions have wounded a total of 344.

IV. Financial aspects

27. By its resolution 58/307 of 18 June 2004, the General Assembly appropriated to the Special Account for UNIFIL the amount of $92.9 million gross, equivalent to a monthly rate of $7.7 million, for the maintenance of the Force for the period from 1 July 2004 to 30 June 2005. Should the Council decide to extend the mandate of UNIFIL beyond 31 July 2004, as recommended in paragraph 36 below, the cost of maintaining the Mission would be limited to the monthly rate approved by the General Assembly.

28. As at 31 May 2004, unpaid assessments to the Special Account for UNIFIL for the period since its inception to 30 April 2004 amounted to $71 million. The total outstanding assessed contributions for all peacekeeping operations at that date amounted to $1,187 million.

V. Observations

29. The situation in south Lebanon over the past six months can be described as being replete with contradictions. While both Israel and Lebanon proclaimed their aspirations to avoid destabilization of the area, only one month passed without confrontation. Furthermore, single incidents often sparked a chain reaction of violence to which both sides contributed. Importantly, none of those events spiralled out of control, and for this the parties and UNIFIL all deserve credit. Nevertheless, the considerable risk remains that hostile acts will escalate and lead the parties into conflict. I cannot stress enough the need for the parties to abide by their obligations under the relevant Security Council resolutions, to respect the withdrawal line in its entirety and to exercise the utmost restraint. Neither side can afford to discount the risks attendant to ignoring their obligations.

30. The whole of southern Lebanon, including all villages in the formerly Israeli-occupied zone down to the Blue Line, successfully took part in municipal elections. The free exercise of the democratic process is a universally acknowledged marker of stability. It is also a clear assertion of the exercise of authority by the Government of Lebanon. The Government of Lebanon also demonstrated its capacity to exercise its authority through the activities of the Joint Security Force. Nevertheless, events demonstrated that further efforts were required to maintain calm in the south and to halt violations of the Blue Line, especially violations of the ceasefire. I reiterate the Security Council's call for the Government of Lebanon to extend measures to ensure the return of its effective authority throughout the south, including the deployment of Lebanese armed forces, and to do its utmost to ensure calm. I urge the Government to exert control over the use of force on its entire territory.

31. It remains a matter of deep concern that Israel persists in its provocative and unjustified air violations of sovereign Lebanese territory. Hezbollah's retaliatory firing of anti-aircraft rounds across the Blue Line is a violation that poses a direct threat to human life. While Hezbollah use of anti-aircraft weaponry continued the decline noted in my previous report, there were a number of recent occasions when overflights were countered with Hezbollah fire. The use of live fire across the Blue Line should not be permitted. This prohibition also pertains to retaliatory Israeli air strikes on Hezbollah or other positions inside Lebanon, which also pose a serious danger to civilians. One violation of the Blue Line cannot justify another.

32. I note with concern the three instances of firing at or close to UNIFIL positions, endangering United Nations personnel. I remind the parties of their obligation to respect the inviolability of United Nations premises and to ensure the safety of United Nations personnel.

33. I wish to stress the need for an intensified focus by all concerned on the rehabilitation and economic development of the south. The achievements made in demining over the past year, accomplished through exemplary cooperation among the United Arab Emirates, the United Nations and the Lebanese authorities, were part of an encouraging trend supporting stability and social and economic development. In this respect, I urge the Government of Lebanon and the international donors to bolster their efforts. The United Nations remains strongly committed to assisting Lebanon in its economic rehabilitation of the south.

34. UNIFIL will continue to contribute to the restoration of international peace and security through observing, monitoring and reporting on developments in its area of operation and liaising with the parties to maintain calm. My Personal

Representative will continue, in close consultation with the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, to lend the political and diplomatic support of the United Nations to the parties to establish lasting peace and security in southern Lebanon.

35. The situation along the Blue Line continues to be susceptible to volatile regional developments. This again underscores the need to achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East, based on all the relevant resolutions of the Security Council, including resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002) and 1515 (2003).

36. In a letter dated 9 July 2004 (S/2004/560), the Permanent Representative of Lebanon to the United Nations conveyed to me his Government's request that the Security Council extend the mandate of UNIFIL for a further period of six months. In the light of conditions prevailing in the area, I recommend that the Security Council extend the mandate of UNIFIL until 31 January 2005.

37. I must again draw attention to the unpaid assessments for the funding of the Force, which amount to $71 million. This represents money owed to the Member States contributing the troops that make up the Force. I appeal to all Member States to pay their assessments promptly and in full and to clear all remaining arrears. I should like to express my gratitude to the Governments contributing troops to the Force for their understanding and patience.

38. In conclusion, I wish to express my appreciation to Terje Roed-Larsen, the Special Coordinator, and to Mr. de Mistura, my Personal Representative, and to pay tribute to Major General Tewari, Major General Pellegrini and the men and women of UNIFIL for the manner in which they have carried out their tasks. Their discipline and bearing have been of a high order, reflecting credit on themselves and the United Nations.