IDF chief to UNIFIL: Stop Hezbollah’s missile program, or we will

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By Judah Ari Gross

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IDF chief Aviv Kohavi on Sunday called on United Nations peacekeepers and the Lebanese government to take action against the Hezbollah terror group’s precision missile project, indicating that Israel would be forced to act if they didn’t.

Kohavi conveyed this position in a meeting with Maj.-Gen. Stefano Del Col, the head of the UN’s Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), following a clash along the border with Hezbollah on Sunday in which the terror group fired anti-tank guided missiles at Israeli positions near the security fence. No soldiers were injured, and the Israel Defense Forces retaliated by firing approximately 100 artillery shells and bombs at Hezbollah positions in southern Lebanon.

“We will not accept harm to our citizens or our soldiers, and we will not accept Hezbollah’s precision missile project on Lebanese soil,” Kohavi told Del Col.

This was their first meeting since the IDF chief of staff took up his position in January.

“The state of Lebanon and UNIFIL must bring an end to Iran and Hezbollah’s precision missile project in Lebanon and fully implement [UN] Security Council Resolution 1701,” Kohavi said, referring to the resolution that ended the 2006 Second Lebanon War.

“The current state of affairs is not one we can come to terms with,” he said.

UN Resolution 1701 calls for all armed groups, besides the Lebanese military, to be removed from southern Lebanon, in the area south of the country’s Litani River.

Israel has repeatedly claimed that the Hezbollah terror group, occasionally aided by the Lebanese Armed Forces, maintains an active presence in southern Lebanon of both fighters and weaponry despite this prohibition. UNIFIL, which is tasked with ensuring Resolution 1701’s implementation, has indicated that the constraints of its mandate prevent it from being able to fully investigate Israel’s claims, namely because of the peacekeepers’ inability to enter private property.

A tense calm took hold over northern Israel on Monday following the exchange of fire the day before, but Kohavi told the UNIFIL commander that the IDF remained at the ready for any new developments.

“The IDF is in a state of preparedness for a variety of possible scenarios,” Kohavi said.

In a statement on Sunday night, Del Col said, “This is a serious incident in violation of UN Security Council resolution 1701 and clearly directed at undermining stability in the area,” Del Col said. “General calm has been restored in the area and the parties have reassured me of their continued commitment to the cessation of hostilities in accordance with Resolution 1701.”

UN chief Antonio Guterres also called on Israel and the Iran-backed Hezbollah to show “maximum restraint,” saying in a statement Sunday that he was “seriously concerned” by the recent exchange of fire along the border.

France foreign ministry, meanwhile, said it had made “multiple contacts” to avert an escalation after Lebanon’s Prime Minister Saad Hariri contacted senior US and French officials to urge their countries and the international community to intervene.

“We are in permanent contact with all the Lebanese actors,” a spokeswoman said. “France will pursue efforts in this direction and asks all to assume their responsibilities to quickly restore calm.”

The United States voiced concern over the “destabilizing role” of Iranian proxies in the region and said it “supports Israel’s right to self defense,” a State Department official said.

“Hezbollah should refrain from hostile actions which threaten Lebanon’s security, stability and sovereignty,” the US official added.

Israel and Hezbollah, which fought a month-long war in 2006, have indicated they do not want to go to war but appeared on a collision course in recent days after Hezbollah vowed it would retaliate for a pair of Israeli strikes against the Iran-backed terrorist group — one in Syria claimed by Israel, and another, in Beirut, that the group lays at Israel’s door.

Hezbollah said it fired anti-tank missiles at Israel on Sunday and destroyed an Israeli military vehicle across the border. The IDF said no Israeli soldiers were injured by the 2-3 missiles fired by Hezbollah, which struck a military jeep and an IDF base. Pictures and videos showing injured soldiers being evacuated had been a ploy meant to trick Hezbollah into thinking it had caused casualties.

The Iranian proxy group indicated the attack was in retaliation for the Israeli airstrike in Syria last month that killed several operatives, including two of its members.

Hezbollah’s deputy leader, Naim Kassem, said Sunday night that the group “wants to preserve deterrence and the rules of engagement in order to prevent something worse from happening.”

By Sunday evening, the Israeli army allowed civilians to return to routine. Schools on Monday opened as normal and farmers were given the go-ahead to work fields near the border. However, Israeli officials said troops along the northern border remained on high alert.

“We are consulting about the next steps,” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said. “I have ordered that we be prepared for any scenario. We will decide on the next steps pending developments.”