12 children killed as Hezbollah rocket hits soccer field, sparking wider war fears

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At least 12 children were killed Saturday, and dozens more people were wounded, when a rocket fired from Lebanon hit a soccer field in the northern Druze town of Majdal Shams in the Golan Heights. It was the single deadliest Hezbollah attack on northern Israel since fighting there began in October.

Residents and first responders described scenes of bloody carnage on the pitch. Though a warning siren had sounded, it was too short an alert for the victims, who were unable to flee in time. The IDF said late Saturday that all 12 fatalities were aged 10-20.

The shocking attack led to swift promises of retaliation and talk of an unprecedented response among Israeli officials as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hurried home from the US, raising the specter of a fresh escalation and a potential full-blown war between Israel and the Lebanese terror group.

A Biden administration official expressed concern that the deadly Hezbollah strike could spark an all-out war between Israel and the Iran-backed terror group. “What happened today could be the trigger we have been worried about and tried to avoid for 10 months,” the official told Axios.

Politicians from across the spectrum expressed outrage at the attack and criticized the government’s failure to bring security to the north after long months of fighting, while demanding decisive action against Hezbollah.

Israel Defense Forces Spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said in a press conference on Saturday night that all the victims were aged 10 to 20.

Photographs and video from the scene immediately after the rocket strike showed people scrambling to help the casualties and parents searching desperately for their children.

Baruch Padeh Medical Center near Tiberias said four people in serious condition were brought to the hospital. Ziv Medical Center in Safed said it admitted 32 wounded, including six being treated in the trauma ward, 13 in moderate-to-serious condition, and 10 who were lightly hurt. Another four casualties were taken to Rambam Medical Center in Haifa.

Medics declared 10 of the victims dead at the scene, while two were declared dead at hospitals, officials said.

“We witnessed great destruction when we arrived at the soccer field, as well as items that were on fire. There were casualties on the grass and the scene was gruesome,” said Idan Avshalom, a medic with the Magen David Adom ambulance service.

Hezbollah initially claimed responsibility for launching a barrage of Katyusha rockets and a single heavy Falaq rocket at a nearby military base.

As news emerged of the heavy rocket hitting the Druze town, and the deadly outcome of the strike, the terror group issued a statement that it had “absolutely nothing to do with the incident.”

The army rejected that assertion, saying the attack “was carried out by the Hezbollah terror group” while citing “assessments carried out by the IDF and reliable intelligence information available to us.”

The IDF said it had determined that the rocket was launched by the terror group from an area just north of the Lebanese village of Chebaa.

Hagari in a press conference from the scene identified the rocket that struck Majdal Shams as an Iranian-made Falaq-1.

“A Falaq-1 rocket struck here in the soccer field, it is an Iranian rocket, manufactured in Iran, a rocket with a warhead of over 50 kilograms of explosives,” he said.

“The forensic findings at the scene point to this rocket. Falaq-1 is only in use by the Hezbollah terror group, which carried out this attack from Chebaa,” Hagari added.

Col. Avichay Adraee, the IDF’s Arabic-language spokesman, revealed the name of the Hezbollah commander who directed the deadly rocket attack.

He said the attack was directed by Ali Muhammad Yahya, who is the commander of a rocket launching site in the Chebaa area.

“Despite its attempts to deny: Hezbollah is responsible for the massacre in Majdal Shams and the killing of children and boys on the soccer field,” Adraee added.

Earlier, Hagari said that according to an initial probe, rocket sirens sounded in the town “but this is an immediate alert — too short.”

“In the past hour, Hezbollah has been lying and denying responsibility for the incident,” Hagari said. “Our intelligence is clear, Hezbollah is responsible for the murder of innocent children.

“We share in the grief of the families and embrace the Druze community in its difficult time,” he added. “Once again the brutality of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization is exposed. This is a very grave incident and we will act accordingly.”

Israeli officials signaled the military response to the Hezbollah rocket attack would likely be a very aggressive one.

Top military and security officials presented Defense Minister Yoav Gallant with “options for action against Hezbollah” in response to the deadly attack, his office said.

“Gallant determined the courses of action and instructed the defense establishment accordingly,” the Defense Ministry said in a statement.

The minister had held an assessment with IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Herzi Halevi, head of the Shin Bet Ronen Bar, head of the Mossad David Barnea, and other officials.

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Channel 12 cited a senior Israeli official in the prime minister’s delegation to Washington as saying: “The events in the north will bring about a dramatic turning point in fighting in the area.”

Kan news cited an unnamed senior official as saying “The disaster at Majdal Shams could signal a change of direction in the war.” A security official told the public broadcaster: “This is an incident that we will not gloss over. There will be a severe response.”

Netanyahu, who was still in the US on Saturday after his speech to Congress and meetings with top American officials, moved up his flight back to Israel by several hours following the attack.

The attack came after the IDF on Saturday afternoon struck a cell of Hezbollah gunmen at a weapons depot in southern Lebanon’s Kafr Kila. The military said the operatives were identified by troops of the 869th Combat Intelligence Collection Unit entering the weapons depot, and a short while later, an airstrike was carried out.

Hezbollah later confirmed that four of its operatives, members of the terror group’s elite Nukhba force, were killed in the strike.

Rocket fire from Hezbollah toward northern Israel was ongoing throughout Saturday, with one damaging a home in the border community of Arab al-Arashme in the morning. No injuries were reported in that attack.

Meanwhile, a Hezbollah drone apparently heading toward offshore gas infrastructure in Israel’s territorial waters on Saturday morning was shot down by the ship-mounted Iron Dome system, known as C-Dome.

According to the IDF, one of the Navy’s Sa’ar 6-class corvettes intercepted the drone at a significant distance from the Karish gas field, and there was no threat to the offshore infrastructure in the incident. The IDF said it was still investigating if the drone was laden with explosives or used by Hezbollah for surveillance.

Since October 8, Hezbollah-led forces have attacked Israeli communities and military posts along the border on a near-daily basis, with the group saying it is doing so to support Gaza amid the war there.

So far, the skirmishes have resulted in 24 civilian deaths on the Israeli side — including in Saturday’s attack — as well as the deaths of 18 IDF soldiers and reservists. There have also been several attacks from Syria, without any injuries.

Hezbollah has named 381 members who have been killed by Israel during the ongoing skirmishes, mostly in Lebanon but some also in Syria. In Lebanon, another 68 operatives from other terror groups, a Lebanese soldier, and dozens of civilians have been killed.