



## Security Council

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### Letter dated 29 July 2020 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council

In a letter dated 2 June 2020 addressed to me, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Emigrants of Lebanon requested that the Security Council extend the mandate of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) for a further year, without any amendments to its mandate, its concept of operations and its rules of engagement. In that regard, and further to my recent reports to the Council of 14 July 2020 (S/2020/710) on the implementation of Council resolution 1701 (2006) and of 1 June 2020 (S/2020/473) on the assessment of the continued relevance of UNIFIL resources mandated in Council resolution 2485 (2019), I hereby request the Council to consider renewing the mandate of UNIFIL, which is due to expire on 31 August 2020.

While I commend both the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Israel Defense Forces on their continued commitment to maintaining the cessation of hostilities and their close cooperation with UNIFIL, there has been no tangible progress towards a permanent ceasefire and a long-term solution to the conflict, as called for in resolution 1701 (2006). Both parties have yet to fulfil their respective obligations under the resolution. Israel must cease all violations of Lebanese sovereignty and airspace, as well as expedite the withdrawal of its forces from northern Ghajar and the adjacent area north of the Blue Line in accordance with resolution 1701 (2006). There have been continued violations of Lebanese airspace by Israeli aircraft, including to allegedly carry out strikes inside the Syrian Arab Republic, which remain of deep concern. The Lebanese authorities should take all action to ensure that there are no unauthorized armed personnel, assets or weapons in the area between the Blue Line and the Litani River other than those belonging to the Government of Lebanon and to UNIFIL, bearing in mind the primary responsibility of the Lebanese Armed Forces in that regard. UNIFIL, in close coordination with the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon, continues to work with both parties to fulfil these critical outstanding obligations.

The past 12 months have seen incidents of serious concern in the cessation of hostilities, including the incident between Lebanon and Israel on 1 September 2019, as detailed in my report of 18 November 2019 (S/2019/889). Following reports on 25 August that one unmanned aerial vehicle had crashed and another one had exploded in Beirut, and increased tensions along the Blue Line, Hizbullah claimed responsibility for a missile fired into Israel on 1 September 2019, which led to artillery fire from Israel into Lebanon. Whereas that series of incidents was contained through active liaison by UNIFIL, it demonstrated the risk of escalation across the Blue Line and underlined the need for progress in addressing the outstanding provisions of resolution 1701 (2006).



The stability of Lebanon has been further challenged by the continued deterioration of the country's economic situation, compounded by the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. In addition, since the onset of nationwide protests in October 2019, the presence of the Lebanese Armed Forces in the UNIFIL area of operations has been reduced as it carries out security responsibilities elsewhere in the country.

The liaison and coordination arrangements UNIFIL has established with the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Israel Defense Forces, bilaterally and through the tripartite forum, remain vital for mitigating tensions along the Blue Line. The parties – Israel and Lebanon – remain unwilling to engage, other than at the operational level under the UNIFIL umbrella. I encourage the parties to re-engage in visibly marking the Blue Line on the ground, a process that has been stalled since 2017, including at contentious points where solutions could be explored within the tripartite framework and without prejudice to future border negotiations. Such a confidence-building measure would be helpful with regard to monitoring violations and preventing inadvertent crossings.

The Government of Lebanon continues to express its strong commitment to expanding the capacity of the Lebanese Armed Forces on land and at sea, which remains vital for enhancing State presence in southern Lebanon. Mobilizing additional international support to build this capacity is a key priority, and follow-up to the commitments made at the ministerial-level meeting known as the Rome II conference is critical for progress in that regard. UNIFIL, in consultation with the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon, continues to engage in mobilizing international support for developing the capabilities identified as priorities by the Lebanese Armed Forces, including the deployment of a model regiment to southern Lebanon and the development of a strategy for the gradual transition of responsibilities from the UNIFIL Maritime Task Force to the Lebanese Navy. Given the economic situation in Lebanon, international support will be even more important to help to realize that goal.

Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020, UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces have continued to work together through the conduct of exercises and the provision of training, on land and at sea, with the aim of increasing the capacity, capabilities and presence of the Lebanese Armed Forces in southern Lebanon and the territorial waters of Lebanon. As detailed in my assessment report (S/2020/473), in order to achieve a gradual transition of UNIFIL Maritime Task Force responsibilities to the Government of Lebanon, the Lebanese Navy has begun to participate in maritime interdiction operations along with the Task Force for a one-year trial period, in order to validate that the Lebanese Navy is capable of taking over partial responsibilities of the Task Force in one sector of the area of maritime operations, while maintaining the operational tempo of the Task Force. The inspection by the Lebanese Navy of 100 per cent of the ships referred by UNIFIL will be an important factor in contributing to the success of the trial period.

In accordance with its mandate, UNIFIL remains committed to taking all actions necessary within its capabilities to ensure that its area of operations is not utilized for hostile activities of any kind. To that end, UNIFIL has maintained a high operational tempo and increased visibility in accordance with Council resolutions 2373 (2017), 2433 (2018) and 2485 (2019), including through foot patrols; increased night patrols along the Blue Line; and a more effective use of air assets, including by increasing the number of operational flights, such as reconnaissance over areas to which ground patrols have limited access, and undertaking night flights over rugged and difficult terrain.

As noted in my recent reports on the implementation of resolution [1701 \(2006\)](#), UNIFIL has yet to gain full access to several sites of interest, despite repeated formal requests to the Lebanese Armed Forces. Among those locations are the Green without Borders sites in Aytarun (Sector West), to which a visit was requested in connection with the UNIFIL technical investigation into the 1 September 2019 exchange of fire across the Blue Line. The ability of UNIFIL to investigate such incidents constitutes a core part of its mandate to prevent actions by the parties that could undermine the cessation of hostilities, and it is incumbent upon the parties to facilitate UNIFIL investigations, including by facilitating its timely access to all related locations.

The freedom of movement of UNIFIL in its entire area of operations and along the full length of the Blue Line remains critical. It is the primary responsibility of the Lebanese authorities to ensure such freedom of movement and to facilitate full access by UNIFIL to locations for preventive inspections. The incidents involving restrictions of UNIFIL freedom of movement have been detailed in my reports on the implementation of resolution [1701 \(2006\)](#).

To date, the United Nations has not been informed of criminal proceedings to bring to justice the perpetrators of the attack on UNIFIL peacekeepers that occurred on 4 August 2018 in Majdal Zun. This remains critical for preventing future incidents and retaining the confidence of troop-contributing countries. In relation to the tunnels confirmed by UNIFIL to cross the Blue Line, it remains essential that the Lebanese authorities undertake a thorough investigation on the Lebanese side and that UNIFIL gain access to relevant sites.

It is also important to note the urgent need for progress on the responsibility of Israel to cease all violations of Lebanese sovereignty and airspace. The overflights cause distress to Lebanese civilians, run counter to the efforts of UNIFIL to reduce tensions and have a negative impact on the credibility of the Lebanese Armed Forces and UNIFIL.

As at 16 July 2020, the total number of military personnel was 10,886 members, including 584 women. The Maritime Task Force comprised six vessels, two helicopters and 877 military personnel. The UNIFIL civilian component comprised 239 international and 580 national staff. I am grateful to the 45 troop-contributing countries and continue to encourage them to increase the number of women deployed to UNIFIL.

As requested by the Council in its resolution [2485 \(2019\)](#), the Secretariat conducted a thorough assessment of the continued relevance of UNIFIL resources. The findings, detailed in my assessment report ([S/2020/473](#)), indicated that the stability of the UNIFIL area of operations remained fragile amid increasingly complex conflict dynamics in the region and the absence of political progress to resolve the underlying causes of the conflict between Israel and Lebanon. Protracted tensions in the wider region, Israel's security concern regarding Hizbullah's military capabilities, the Syrian conflict and the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict remain key factors that affect the stability of the region and of the Blue Line, with an undiminished risk of a resumption of hostilities between the parties, even if accidentally triggered. In this highly volatile context, UNIFIL monitors and supports the cessation of hostilities between Lebanon and Israel and provides valuable deterrence and prevention and a critical de-escalation mechanism through its operations. The high density of troops and high tempo of operations continue to play a critical and necessary role in the ability of UNIFIL to prevent conflict and implement its mandate.

In my assessment report, I identified several options for optimizing the configuration and operations of UNIFIL, including a greater focus on reconnaissance functions (less on heavy infantry), with increased reliance on lighter vehicles, and a

strengthening of the liaison and coordination capabilities of the mission. The report also contained a recommendation for reconfiguring UNIFIL operations towards the Blue Line, as well as options for enhancing monitoring and reporting with new technology.

I indicated in my report that, according to the assessment, the transfer of some Maritime Task Force responsibilities to the Lebanese Navy could be realized and might warrant consideration of a reduction of the Task Force by one ship (from the current six corvettes to five), following the completion of the ongoing trial period referred to above. In addition, I identified options to, inter alia, consolidate several United Nations positions, repatriate some excess equipment and conduct a review of the civilian staffing structure of the mission. If the options for optimizing UNIFIL capabilities, as outlined in my report, are supported and endorsed by the Council, the Secretariat will commence discussions with the Government of Lebanon, the Government of Israel and troop-contributing countries, with a view to concluding the implementation process as rapidly as possible.

Meanwhile, pending a final agreement on the boundary between Lebanon and Israel, and as long as the Lebanese Armed Forces is not able to deploy to southern Lebanon in significantly larger numbers, UNIFIL operational and liaison activities continue to provide valuable deterrence and a critical de-escalation mechanism in a context in which escalation remains a real possibility. The leverage of UNIFIL and its ability to continue to perform its mandated tasks are inextricably linked to its capabilities, and I believe that UNIFIL, with its robust posture, remains necessary to prevent a security vacuum until such time as the parties can move towards a permanent ceasefire. UNIFIL, in close coordination with the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon, is ready to lend its full support to the parties in this process.

I would like to express my appreciation to the Head of Mission and Force Commander of UNIFIL, Major General Stefano Del Col, and to all the military and civilian personnel of UNIFIL, for the work they are carrying out in southern Lebanon and for their commitment in the service of peace.

The General Assembly, by its resolution [74/292](#), took into account the special circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic and authorized the Secretary-General to enter into commitments in the amount of \$480.6 million for the maintenance of the Force for the period from 1 July 2020 to 30 June 2021.

As at 17 July 2020, unpaid assessed contributions to the special account for UNIFIL amounted to \$171.9 million. The total outstanding assessed contributions for all peacekeeping operations at that date amounted to \$3,053.5 million.

Reimbursement of the costs of troop and formed police personnel, as well as for contingent-owned equipment have been made for the period up to 31 December 2019, in accordance with the quarterly payment schedule.

I should like to express my appreciation for the continued united and steadfast support of the Council for UNIFIL and its mandated activities. With the above information in mind, I recommend that the Council extend the mandate of UNIFIL for a further period of 12 months, until 31 August 2021.

I should be grateful if you would bring the present letter to the attention of the members of the Council.

*(Signed)* António **Guterres**