
MAJOR GENERAL AROLDO LÁZARO, COMMANDER OF UNIFIL

“A WHOLE GENERATION IN SOUTHERN LEBANON HAS GROWN UP IN A SITUATION OF CALM”

The new head of the UN mission hopes the cessation of hostilities will be upheld, the first step towards a future lasting peace

“IT is a privilege to represent Spain in its commitment to the UN and to international peace and security”, says Major General Aroldo Lázaro, after taking the helm as Commander of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) made up of 10,300 Blue Helmets and 800 civilians from 46 countries. Although the situation has often been described as a “tense and fragile quiet”, this military officer born in Sidi Ifni (Morocco) in 1962 praises the fact that this mission has managed “to maintain a situation of calm for more than fifteen years, without major conflicts or confrontations between the Lebanese and Israelis”, and hopes that this will continue to be the case under his mandate.

Of the three previous occasions on which he was in Lebanon, the last in 2016-17 as Commander of Sector East and of the multinational brigade led by Spain, General Lázaro remembers, above all, “the character of its people and the warm welcome accorded to the Spanish military by the different religious, ethnic and social groups, due to our humane attitude and the

neutrality and impartiality that we display”. Also assigned to three missions in Bosnia-Herzegovina (under UN, NATO and EU flags), as well as to the headquarters of the European Rapid Operational Force (EUROFOR, Florence), the NATO High Readiness Land Force (Bétera, Valencia) and, as commander, to the Mechanised Brigade *Guzmán el Bueno* (Córdoba), he assures that “it is going to be a great experience that will allow me to get to know different cultures and gain an insight into the expertise and diverse working procedures, which will help me grow as a soldier and as a person”.

—How are you approaching the command of this mission?

“Respect for local culture and customs and an impartial approach are crucial”

—With pride and, at the same time, with great responsibility, because of the trust bestowed upon me, first by the Minister of Defence, on behalf of the government, in appointing me as our country’s candidate, and then by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, in choosing me for this position.

—How have you prepared for this responsibility?

—The selection process to be appointed commander of UNIFIL has required extensive and thorough preparation. I have been guided, advised and supported by the structure of the General Secretariat for Defence Policy, both in terms of the activities related to the acquisition of knowledge and skills on national and international aspects of security and defence, and in conducting interviews and making presentations at the UN Department of Peace Operations.

—What is your main objective?

—To continue with the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) and the fulfilment of the new mandate of



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Resolution 2591 (2021) in order to maintain stability in southern Lebanon, by guaranteeing respect for the *Blue Line*, facilitating the extension of the Lebanese Government's influence and providing support to its Armed Forces in the area. The aim is to create the necessary conditions for a permanent agreement between the parties involved to achieve a cessation of hostilities and a lasting peace.

—What is the current security situation in UNIFIL's area of operations?

—Relatively quiet. The situation is fragile, as evidenced by several past incidents. The rapid escalation of hostile actions by the opposing parties may occur at any time. And that is UNIFIL's responsibility. It has to monitor the cessation of hostilities and implement liaison and mediation measures to prevent any incident from escalating into a confrontation.

—In your opinion, how has the situation evolved in your different tours of duty?

—It has improved over the years. Since 2006, the situation of general calm has enabled a favourable evolution of the economic development and living conditions of the population. The Lebanese Armed Forces have also increased their presence and activities in the area, thereby extending the government's action and improving stability. The country is currently going through a severe economic, political and social crisis which, exacerbated by Beirut's port explosion in August 2020, has a direct negative impact on the population and its Armed Forces.

—How have this event and the COVID-19 pandemic affected the mission?

—Both factors have deeply affected the reality of the country. UNIFIL has adapted to these challenges in order to continue providing the necessary conditions of peace and stability in its area of operations. In the aftermath of the explosion, UNIFIL helped with personnel and material resources in clearing and reopening the port, and involved engineer units in the task.

With regard to the pandemic, the Force has provided protective equipment and carried out disinfection tasks in communities in southern Lebanon.

—What are the consequences of the war in Syria?

—The most significant has been the large influx of refugees into the south. Lebanon is estimated to have received around 1.5 million people from Syria. A large number of them remain on Lebanese soil in precarious conditions, housed in refugee camps.

—What assistance is UNIFIL providing to the Lebanese Army in the current economic crisis?

—At the request of the UN Security Council and for a period of six months, UNIFIL is providing various forms of support to the Lebanese Armed Forces to help them maintain their operability and continue with their joint activities. The aim is to support the capabilities of the security and defence pillar to ensure the sovereignty and provision of services of the Lebanese Government in the area. These special and temporary measures take the form of logistic support, mainly in terms of food, fuel and medicines. In addition, regular donations of equipment, off-road vehicles, buses, trucks and trailers continue to be provided on a regular basis.

Spain has contributed by sending food, medicines and medical supplies to ease the critical situation experienced by the members of the Lebanese Army.

—What are the necessary steps to attain lasting stability in the area?

—We need to continue to pursue the measures set out in Security Council Resolution 1701 and subsequent resolutions. In this field of action, it is essential to ensure that both sides respect the *Blue Line*, avoiding incidents, and to continue supporting the Lebanese government to guarantee its sovereignty and governmental action south of the Litani River, mainly through its Armed Forces. Achieving these general premises would provide the necessary conditions for an agreement between the parties and a lasting peace, which is already the task



“UNIFIL is helping to keep the Lebanese Armed Forces operational in the current economic crisis in Lebanon”, says General Lázaro.

in hand for the Israeli and Lebanese diplomatic and political spheres. This would mean that UNIFIL has accomplished its mission.

—How would you describe the fact that there are still incidents on the *Blue Line*?

—The *Blue Line* is not a border officially recognised by the two countries, but a demarcation line established by the UN in 2000 to confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces. Any unauthorised land or air crossing is a violation of Resolution 1701.

Although both sides agreed to fully respect the *Blue Line*, there are several areas where the two countries still have their reservations about its delineation. This is where most incidents take place, and also where UNIFIL is stepping up its activity to prevent the situation from deteriorating. Lebanon and Israel accepted UNIFIL as the sole custodian of the *Blue Line* and the final arbitrator on violations of the Line. UNIFIL has several



mechanisms in place to ensure permanent liaison with both parties. The commander has direct communication with senior Lebanese and Israeli military commanders; regular meetings, such as the Tripartite Forum, are held between representatives of the Force and the parties. In addition, UNIFIL has liaison teams deployed on both sides of the *Blue Line*, who conduct patrols to assess the situation and rapidly respond to incidents that may occur, always in coordination with Lebanon and Israel.

– Is there still a risk of an escalation of tension?

– If not properly controlled and managed, one-off incidents can lead to an escalation of tension between the parties. The continued presence of UNIFIL personnel, vehicle and foot patrols, interposition between the parties along the *Blue Line*, as well as liaison, mediation and negotiation mechanisms are key assets to reinforce security and prevent or reduce such escalation.

– How is the presence of the Blue Helmets perceived by the local population?

– In general in a very positive way, as they have ensured the longest period, more than fifteen years, without a major armed conflict in southern Lebanon. This has allowed a whole generation to grow up in a situation of calm. The support of the civilian society is crucial to the fulfilment of UNIFIL's mandate, and gaining their acceptance and trust requires respect for local culture and customs as well as an impartial approach.

– What are the most significant activities in support of the population?

– Although UNIFIL is not a humanitarian aid or development mission, since its inception it has had a close and continuous relationship with the local population, aimed at ensuring the stability of the communities living in southern Lebanon. The activities of the various contingents deployed include medical, dental and veterinary support;

assistance for agricultural projects; maintenance of land communication routes, especially in winter; language and computer courses, etc. UNIFIL and the participating countries also implement projects known as quick impact projects, to meet the most urgent basic needs of the population. In Sector East, the Spanish contingent undertakes specific cooperation programmes to teach Spanish and train people for emergency situations, and facilitates the support of staff from various Spanish universities to carry out projects related to agriculture and veterinary assistance.

– What is UNIFIL's role in the field of demining?

– The aim is to facilitate the visible marking of the *Blue Line* and to guarantee the safety and security of patrols, in order to reduce the risk posed by the presence of mines and explosive devices in southern Lebanon. Activities are conducted in the area of operations, primarily by Cambodian and Chinese engineer units, in coordination with the Lebanese Mine Action Centre (LMAC) and with the support of the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS). UNMAS, in collaboration with UNIFIL, raises the awareness of the population about the risks in the area.

– UNIFIL is the only UN mission with a maritime component. How is this task working to prevent arms smuggling?

– The Maritime Task Force (MTF) consists of five ships and one helicopter, belonging to several nations. It supports the Lebanese Navy in controlling its territorial waters, securing its maritime borders and ports and preventing the unauthorized entry of arms or related materiel. It complements this support with air surveillance activities over Lebanese land and maritime territory, as well as maritime search and rescue. Another role of the MTF is to help increase the country's naval operational capabilities by training navy personnel and units, conducting exercises and providing technical support.

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Photos: Hélène Gicquel