

Two Irish soldiers injured by Lebanon road bomb

Two among last seven with UN peace mission

**DON DUNCAN IN BEIRUT
AND RONAN MCGREEVY**

Two Irish United Nations peacekeeping soldiers were injured yesterday by a roadside bomb on a coastal motorway south of Beirut.

Company Sgt Dave Williams and Regimental Sgt Maj John McCormack, both from Dublin, were travelling in a UN vehicle when the bomb exploded at 2.50pm local time, causing them "superficial injuries", according to Lt Col Éamon Ó Siochrú, who is the most senior Irish soldier in Lebanon.

Both men are among the seven Irish UN personnel who remain there after the pullout of the 161-strong contingent in October and

November last year.

Taoiseach Bertie Ahern said the attack was a "timely reminder of the daily dangers faced by our peacekeepers throughout the world".

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack but the presence of the UN peacekeeping mission, Unifil, is resented by radical Islamic groups in the area.

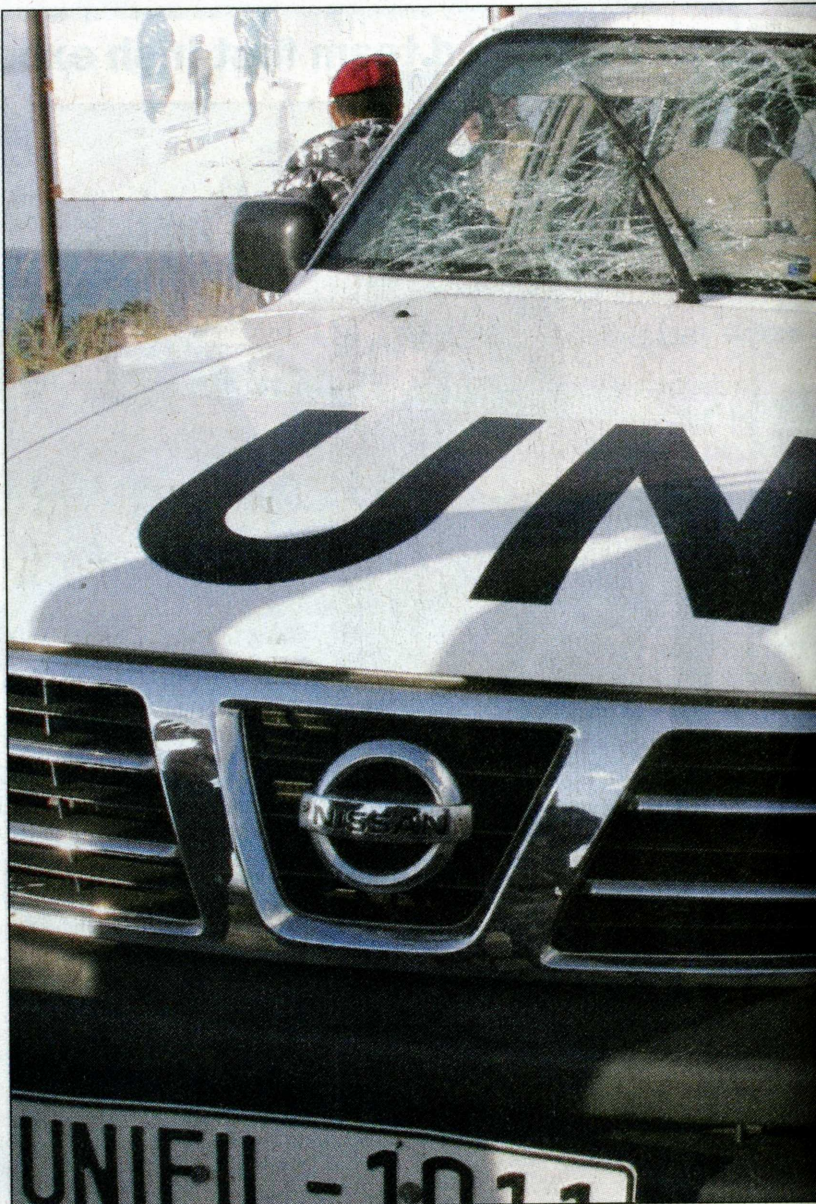
Al-Qaeda has repeatedly called for waging "holy war" against peacekeepers in southern Lebanon, whom it labels "invading crusader forces".

The 13,500-strong Unifil presence was beefed up after the 2006 Israel-Hizbullah war, with a mandate to keep the peace in a buffer zone in southern Lebanon between Israel and Hizbullah.

The explosion occurred near the town of Rmaileh, just outside Lebanon's third biggest city, Saïda, 35km south of Beirut.

The men were travelling between the UN offices in Beirut to Unifil headquarters in the town of Naqoura, near the southern Lebanese border with Israel. They were immediately brought to Hammoud hospital in Saïda city, Lt Col Ó Siochrú said, but their injuries are superficial, consisting of cuts and bruises.

UN spokeswoman Yasmina Bouziane said an investigation had been launched into the inci-



A Lebanese officer gestures next to a damaged UN vehicle after two Irish UN village south of Beirut, yesterday. Photograph: Ali Hashisho/Reuters

dent and Unifil was working with the Lebanese authorities.

"This is not a specific attack against the Irish," former Unifil spokesman Timor Goskel told *The Irish Times*. "This is an attack on the Lebanese authority and the Western forces in Lebanon. There are 50 or 60 UN vehicles which travel between Naqoura and Beirut every day and they have no choice but to take this route."

He said the bomb was strategically planted on a short detour around a bridge under construction, where traffic is forced to slow down.

This is the third attack on Unifil since June 2007, when six peacekeepers in the force's Spanish contingent were killed by a car bomb.

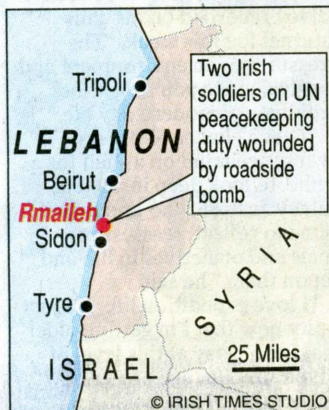
The next month, a Tanzanian convoy was targeted, with no cas-

ualties.

"I'm afraid there will be more of this," Mr Goskel said of the attacks on Unifil, adding that it was not clear who was behind the attacks but that the aim was to destabilise Lebanon and weaken Western forces operating there.

Yesterday's blast came at a tense time in the country and the region. US president George Bush is making his first visit to Israel and the West Bank in an effort to bolster the US-brokered peace initiative kicked off at the Annapolis conference in late November.

Having postponed elections 11 times, the Lebanese government – split between a Western-backed majority and a Hizbullah-led opposition – will attempt to elect a new president this Saturday.



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