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From: Abedin, Huma <AbedinH@state.gov>
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Subject: Hezbollah rejects call by U.N.'s Ban to disarm (Reuters)

BEIRUT (Reuters) - Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah dismissed on Saturday a United Nations call for his militant anti-Israel movement to disarm, saying it was determined to maintain a military capacity to defend Lebanon.

"I affirm today, firmly, decisively and with the greatest conviction ... the choice of armed resistance," Nasrallah said. "These weapons, along with the Lebanese people and army, are the only guarantee of Lebanon's protection."

Mocking a demand by visiting U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon that Hezbollah lay down its weapons, Nasrallah said he was happy that Hezbollah's military prowess was a cause for concern.

"Your concern, Secretary-General, reassures us and pleases us. What matters to us is that you are worried, and that America ... and Israel are worried with you," he said in a televised speech marking a Shi'ite holy day.

On Saturday, as Nasrallah addressed a Hezbollah rally in the town of Baalbek by video link, Ban visited the headquarters of U.N. peacekeeping forces in southern Lebanon, close to the border with Israel and a stronghold of Hezbollah.

"In my meetings with government officials I called on them to increase protection for you," Ban told UNIFIL members, adding that the 293 fatalities since the force was set up in 1978 was the highest death toll suffered by a U.N. peacekeeping force.

"This weighs heavily on my heart," he said.

The Lebanese army has taken on a bigger role in the south since 2006, but given the tensions between Israel and Hezbollah, there is no sign of an exit strategy for the U.N. force there.

Ban, who was in Lebanon for a three-day visit, was due to address a conference in Beirut on Sunday on "reforms and transitions to democracy."

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