

Hezbollah Leader Rallies Members In Uneasy Lebanon
By Associated Press
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BEIRUT (AP) — The leader of Hezbollah rallied hundreds of cheering supporters Friday with sectarian pledges of support for Palestinians, a sign of the unease the group feels as turmoil grows within its home of Lebanon.

Sheik Hassan Nasrallah's first public appearance in almost a year came as Lebanon's president vowed not to be intimidated after two rockets struck near the presidential palace. The rocket volley followed President Michel Suleiman criticizing Hezbollah's involvement in the civil war ravaging neighboring Syria, violence that has spread into Lebanon.

In his speech Friday, Nasrallah did not directly mention the rockets. Instead, he vowed to remain loyal to the Palestinian cause and appeared to be speaking mostly to his Shiite base in Lebanon and across the Muslim world.

"We say to America, Israel, Great Britain and their regional tools, we say to every enemy and friend ... we in Hezbollah will not abandon Palestine and the people of Palestine," he said.

"Call us terrorists, criminals, try to kill us, we Shiites will never abandon Palestine," he added, firing up the crowd.

Nasrallah's rare use of sectarian language, highlighting the Shiite character of his group, is a departure from previous speeches during which he portrayed Hezbollah as a Muslim anti-Israel resistance group. It appeared aimed at whipping up support among Shiites across the Arab world, and reflects the extent which the group feels on the defensive.

Nasrallah has been living underground since the 2006 month long war between his group and Israel, fearing Israeli assassination. He has since made very few and only brief public appearances.

His extended appearance Friday — he spoke for more than half an hour among crowds— is an attempt to show confidence at a time when his group is under growing pressure at home because of its involvement in Syria's civil war. On Thursday, Suleiman gave a speech criticizing the involvement of Hezbollah in Syria's conflict in supporting forces loyal to Syria's embattled President Bashar Assad.

Suleiman suggested Hezbollah's weapons be folded into that of the national Lebanese army. The president said that "resistance weapons have trespassed the Lebanese border," in a reference to Hezbollah. The Iranian-backed group has a formidable weapons arsenal that rivals that of the army.

That night, two rockets struck near the presidential compound in Baabda, southeast of the Lebanese capital, Beirut. It was the second time in two months that rockets have been fired in the area amid tensions related to the civil war in neighboring Syria.

Suleiman said Friday that the attack will not intimidate or make him change his convictions regardless of the party behind it.

"Repeated rocket messages, regardless of the sender or the target ... cannot alter national principles or convictions that are expressed freely and sincerely," the president said in the statement issued by his office. The statement did not say whom officials believed were behind Thursday night's attack.

The rare criticism by Suleiman, a Maronite Catholic, angered Hezbollah and its allies. A pro-Hezbollah newspaper put a picture of Suleiman on its front page Friday with a bold-headlined single word: "Irhal," Arabic for leave.

Who fired the rockets remained unknown Friday, as scores of troops and police officers scoured the perimeter around the presidential palace in search of evidence. Anti-Hezbollah politicians immediately blamed the group and lauded Suleiman. Hezbollah condemned the "terrorist" attack and the "lowly and blatant" attempts to link between the rockets and the speech by Suleiman in which he criticized the group.

Hezbollah's open participation in the war is highly divisive in Lebanon, and has enraged Sunni Muslims there who sympathize with the overwhelmingly Sunni rebels fighting to topple Assad. Hezbollah fighters were instrumental in helping Assad's forces achieve victory over the rebels in the strategic Syrian town of Qusair near the border with Lebanon in June.

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