

Israeli team meets UN officials to discuss plans to view Middle East video

A high-level military delegation from Israel today met with senior United Nations officials to discuss issues surrounding the videotape made last October by UN peacekeepers in Lebanon, shortly after three Israeli soldiers had been abducted by the Hizbollah.

The Israeli delegation, headed by Israeli Defence Force liaison officer Gen. Arditi, held talks with Assistant Secretary-General Hédi Annabi and UN military adviser Gen. Timothy Ford presumably to discuss which videotapes Israel wanted to view along with other articles pertinent to the humanitarian aspects of the kidnapping, UN spokesman Fred Eckhard told a press briefing in New York.

"Our offer was to view the edited version of the first videotape, to view an unedited version of the newly discovered videotape, and to view the seven items taken from the car that have traces of blood on them," Mr. Eckhard said. So far, Lebanon has not responded to any of the UN's offers to view the video, he added.

The spokesman also confirmed that UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan had spoken by telephone on Sunday with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. The Secretary-General expressed the hope that once the Israeli team had viewed the video, "the issue could be put behind us," Mr. Eckhard said. "That's a fervent hope"

Asked about the UN's decision-making process in handling the video, Mr. Eckhard said that the internal probe ordered by Mr. Annan found that the officials involved did not adequately assess the humanitarian value of the information. "On both the military side and the civilian side, the information should have been moved up the chain of command, at which point a political decision based on humanitarian grounds could have been made to inform the Israelis of the amount of blood," he said.

In response to a question about Hizbollah's influence in southern Lebanon, the spokesman recalled that the UN had repeatedly asked the Government of Lebanon to assert its sovereign authority over the south.

"If you look at the Secretary-General's reports on Lebanon you will see that we have been consistently urging the Lebanese Government to take full sovereign control of the southern part of the country," Mr. Eckhard said. "And we have said that the remaining element of our mandate in southern Lebanon is to help secure the peace. Hizbollah's role in southern Lebanon is between Hizbollah and the Lebanese Government. We're asking the Government to exercise its sovereign control over the south."