

UN: hundreds of cluster bombs still litter civilian areas in south Lebanon

By [Lauren Frayer](#)

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Editor's note

While the UN has identified cluster bomb locations, it fails to acknowledge the use by Israel of electromagnetic and chemical weapons directed against civilians. (See our earlier reports on the subject). The issue of extensive war crimes committed by Israel is never raised in any formal way by the UN.

BEIRUT — Homes, gardens and highways across south Lebanon are littered with unexploded cluster bombs dropped by Israel, the United Nations said Friday, and the U.S. State Department has reportedly launched an investigation into whether the American-made weapons' use violated secret agreements with the United States.

"There are about 285 cluster bomb locations across south Lebanon, and our teams are still doing surveys and adding new locations every day," said Dalya Farran, spokeswoman for the UN Mine Action Co-ordination Centre, which has an office in the southern port city of Tyre.

"We find about 30 new locations per day," she said.

This week, the U.S. State Department began investigating Israel's use of American-made cluster bombs in south Lebanon, and whether their use violated secret agreements with Washington, The New York Times reported Friday.

Since a UN-brokered ceasefire took hold Aug. 14, eight Lebanese have been killed by exploding ordnance, including two children, and 38 people have been wounded, according to a UN count.

"A lot of them are in civilian areas, on farmland and in people's homes. We're finding a lot at the entrances to houses, on balconies and roofs," Farran said. "Sometimes windows are broken and they get inside the houses."

The State Department's Office of Defence Trade Controls launched an investigation into Israel's use of three types of American weapons, anti-personnel munitions that spray bomblets over a wide area, The New York Times reported.

The newspaper quoted several current and former U.S. officials as saying they doubted the probe would lead to sanctions against Israel, but that it might be an effort by the Bush administration to ease Arab criticism of its military support for Israel.

The U.S. has also postponed a shipment of M-26 artillery rockets, another cluster weapon, to Israel, the paper said.

United Nations demining experts refused to comment on the reported U.S. investigation into whether Israel's use of such weapons might violate American rules, but suggested it violated some aspects of international law.

"It's not illegal to use against soldiers or your enemy, but according to Geneva Conventions it's illegal to use them (cluster bombs) in civilian areas," Farran said. "But it's not up to us to decide if it's illegal — I'm just giving facts and letting others do analysis."

During the 34-day war between Israel and Hezbollah, Israel said it was forced to hit civilian targets in Lebanon because Hezbollah fighters were using villages as a base for rocket-launchers aimed at Israel. Some 850 Lebanese died in the fighting, compared to 157 Israelis.

Lebanon's south is also riddled with landmines, laid by retreating Israeli soldiers who pulled out of the region in 2000, after an 18-year occupation. Hezbollah has also planted mines to ward off Israeli forces. Lebanon has long called for Israel to hand over maps of the minefields.

The UN Mine Action Co-ordination Centre opened a branch in Tyre in 2003, to deal with the issue of land mines. Since the ceasefire, the office has redirected its efforts toward clearing unexploded Israeli bombs from the area.

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