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Poisonous clouds of pollution spread after Israel air strike

Lebanese minister says damage was deliberate, causing 'an even bigger disaster than the war itself'

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More people will die as a result of pollution unleashed by Israel's bombing of the Lebanon than perished in the month-long war itself, the Lebanese government believes.

Yacoub Sarraf, its Environment Minister, speaking exclusively to The Independent on Sunday, said last week that a highly poisonous cloud spread over a third of the country - an area that is home to half its people - from a fire in a bombed fuel tank that burned for 12 days.

The same bombing released about four million gallons of oil into the sea, in the largest ever spill in the eastern Mediterranean. He insists that the environmental damage was "deliberately" caused. Experts say that, if this was so, it would constitute a war crime, in breach of both the Geneva Convention and the statute of the International Criminal Court. Israel retorts that any such suggestion is "very ridiculous".

The damage began on 13 July, when Israeli rockets hit a fuel storage tank at the Jiyeh power station 18 miles south of Beirut. The government managed to repair the damage and prevent an oil spill. But two days later, he continued, the rockets returned, not merely hitting the same tank again - just 25 metres from the sea - but fatally damaging its protective burm, a concrete and earth barrier designed to stop any oil spilling from the tank from reaching the Mediterranean.

"It was definitely deliberate.,," he said. "They did not hit the power station, just the fuel storage, and this was the tank that was closest to the sea."

He expects the greatest "catastrophe" from the toxic cloud that was blown by the prevailing wind over Beirut and one-third of the country. Tests have shown, he says, that it contains high levels of poisonous lead and mercury, and highly dangerous PCBs.

"Not only have we been breathing this for a month, but all the agricultural produce has been subjected to it. Even worse, all these poisons will come down with the rain, and some will seep through the soil and give us a polluted water table.

"Then in a couple of years every single citizen in Lebanon will definitely be subjected to poisonous matter in his drinking water." He expected more Lebanese to die from the pollution than the 1,300, overwhelmingly civilians, killed in the war. He added that studies have shown there would be decreased fertility and higher rates of cancer. "This is a bigger disaster even than the war itself," Mr Sarraf said.

A spokesman for the Israeli government said: "We deny the minister's accusations. They seem to be very ridiculous.

"We never deliberately targeted any civilian capacity or place, we only targeted places or facilities relevant to Hizbollah."