

Lebanon: civilians pay the price

by Tomas C Archer

As this issue of FMR goes to print, thousands of IDPs and refugees are heading home following the announcement of the UN-brokered ceasefire which came into force on 14 August.

Some 1,110 people in Lebanon, mostly civilians, and 156 Israelis, including 116 soldiers, have been killed in the conflict that flared up after Hizbollah captured two Israeli soldiers on 12 July. Approximately 900,000 Lebanese – out of a total population of less than four million – have been internally displaced. IDPs have sought refuge in schools, public buildings and parks, and with host families. Eighty-eight schools in Beirut alone have been converted into shelters with up to five families living in each classroom. Many have fled to relatives in safer areas north of Beirut. Some families became separated during flight, and are still searching for information about their family members' whereabouts and safety.

The Norwegian Refugee Council has joined many international agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in deploring the fact that civilians have been the main victims in the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah – and criticising the lack of respect shown by both sides for the rules governing the conduct of hostilities, such as the distinction between military objectives and civilian persons and objects. After recent incidents where Lebanese Red Cross ambulances have been hit and medical staff killed, the ICRC has urged medical missions to be respected and has underlined the urgency of gaining humanitarian access to towns and villages in southern Lebanon. Access to Tyre by sea, for example, has become particularly urgent

after the destruction of the main roads and bridges leading south.

NRC echoes Human Rights Watch's call for an international investigation of documented instances of violations of international human rights and humanitarian law by both Israel and Hezbollah [see box]. Human Rights Watch's research¹ shows that Israeli forces consistently launched artillery and air attacks with limited or dubious military gain but excessive civilian cost. The organisation also documented systematic violations of international humanitarian law by Hezbollah, including deliberate and indiscriminate firing of thousands of rockets into civilian areas of Israel.

NRC's country office in Beirut will focus on developing programmes in education, rehabilitation, reconstruction, distribution of non-food items and the provision of information, counselling and legal assistance. In the coming months, a large number of people will remain displaced due to damaged houses and the collapse of infrastructure in the affected areas. As people start to return, one of the dangers they will face is that of unexploded ordnance. The Mines Advisory Group – a British-based conflict recovery organisation² – estimates that around 10% of the 4,000 explosive items dropped daily in Lebanon will fail to explode, posing a serious threat to civilians.

NRC is gravely concerned about the safety and humanitarian situation of those displaced and other civilians who are trapped in areas outside the reach of aid agencies and who may remain exposed to violence. NRC has called for assurances of safe passage for humanitarian convoys to deliver supplies to people in need and is also seconding staff to UN agencies through its emergency standby force NORSTAFF.

Most importantly, it is vital now – if the ceasefire is to be sustainable – to support intensive diplomatic efforts to tackle the root causes of conflict in the Middle East. "The backdrop to this sudden escalation of conflict is six years of diplomatic neglect," says Gareth Evans of the International Crisis Group.³ "Today, the region – and most of all the Lebanese, Palestinian and Israeli peoples – are paying the price."

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Human Rights Watch has urged the UN Human Rights Council to:

- request the UN Secretary-General to establish an International Commission of Inquiry to investigate violations of international human rights and humanitarian law by all parties to the conflict
- call for all parties to ensure safe passage for humanitarian relief and for humanitarian evacuations
- call for all parties to protect civilians from arbitrary displacement, to ensure the physical safety and material well-being of all those displaced by the current conflict, and to establish conditions that allow them to return voluntarily, in safety and dignity, to their homes
- insist that all parties cooperate with and provide access to the four special rapporteurs of the Human Rights Council who have announced plans to travel to Lebanon and Israel.

Full statement at www.hrw.org/english/docs/2006/08/11/lebanon13967.htm

1. www.hrw.org/
2. www.mag.org.uk/
3. www.crisisgroup.org/

ICRC workers pass boxes of aid supplies intended for southern Lebanon across the Litani river, 8 August 2006.

