

Lebanon: Israeli military operations continue to cause large-scale displacement

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Large numbers of people continue to flee their homes every day, as Israel's military operations in Lebanon have been going on unabated. Israel says that the operations and the air, sea and land blockade on the country are in retaliation for the abduction of two soldiers which occurred during border clashes between Hezbollah and Israeli troops. Israeli military operations were initially limited to south Lebanon and the southern districts of Beirut where Hezbollah is based; however, aerial bombing has targeted other parts of Lebanon as well, including Tripoli and El Abdeh in the north. In the last few days, Israel has heavily bombarded south Lebanon, including the southern suburbs of Beirut, villages and towns in the Bekaa valley, as well as Baalbek, Tyre and Hermel. Israeli ground forces expanded operations into Lebanon, sealing off Bint Jbeil, a Hezbollah stronghold on 25 July (UN OCHA, 25 July 2006).

There is no accurate information on the scale of the displacement crisis, and newspapers and humanitarian organisations are reporting different figures. According to the UN, the number of internally displaced people ranges between 500,000 – 750,000 people – up to fifteen per cent of Lebanon's population – since hostilities started on 12 July (UN OCHA, 25 July 2006). The UN estimates that altogether some 800,000 people are affected by the fighting, a figure which includes those who are unable to flee from targeted areas, internally displaced people, and refugees who have fled to Syria (UN OCHA, 24 July 2006). In some villages, population figures have expanded massively. For instance, some 40,000 displaced were estimated to seek refuge in Keyfoun, a town in the Chouf mountains with a pre- July 2006 conflict population of 2000 people (The Guardian, 23 July 2006).

Most of the displaced are from the densely populated areas of south Lebanon, including Tyre, Nabatyeh, Zahrani and Bint Jbeil and the southern districts of Beirut (UN OCHA, 24 July 2006). Patterns of displacement have depended on accessibility to safe roads (CRTDA, 17 July 2006). Many displaced people have fled to the Chouf mountains, one of the only routes out of the south that has not been bombed (IRIN, 19 July 2006). Others have sought safety in the eastern parts of Beirut as well as in other areas, including Mount Lebanon. The majority of the displaced are residing with family and friends as well as in mosques and churches, but the number of people living in public buildings, especially

schools, is increasing. National authorities report that over 110,000 people are living in public buildings, the majority in the Mount Lebanon area (WHO, 24 July 2006; UN OCHA, 25 July 2006).

Daily news reports issued from Beirut document the plight of the displaced. A number of people have been directly targeted as they fled from their villages. News reports documented the deaths and injuries sustained by one family fleeing the village of Kafra, south Lebanon and the deaths of 18 people, half of whom children, who were shot from an Israeli helicopter as they fled their village near Shamaa along the Lebanese-Israeli border (The Guardian, 24 July and 17 July 2006). Israel has ordered the population living in villages and towns south of the Litani river to leave the area, but the massive destruction of roads and bridges makes it extremely difficult for people to flee. In addition to an increasing number of deaths and injuries resulting from the ongoing military operations, there are particular concerns regarding people's access to potable water, sanitation, and health services as well as food shortages and lack of adequate shelter. An assessment by the International Committee of the Red Cross in Tyre district concluded that an estimated 110,000 people, including displaced and residents, are facing severe water and food shortages (UN OCHA, 24 July 2006). The UN refugee agency has reported overcrowding, with people sleeping three families to a room and inadequate sanitation facilities in the Aley region, north of Beirut (UNHCR, 23 July 2006). The World Health Organisation has noted that the psychological impact of the violence is serious, in particular for those who are experiencing displacement for a third or fourth time. Israeli attacks prompted people to flee from the south in 1975 and 1982 during the civil war, as well as in 1996.

The blockade and bombing of key bridges, harbours, roads and airports limits free movement of people and supplies. As a result, only limited medical help and food has been delivered to vulnerable populations, including by the Lebanese High Commission for Relief, a Lebanese government body set up to assist the newly displaced. The UN reports that medical and food stocks are available but that delivery is almost impossible (UN OCHA, 22 July 2006). Supply trucks have been targeted by Israeli forces, including most recently, an Israeli air strike destroyed two Red Cross ambulances (The Guardian, 25 July 2006; HRW, 20 July 2006). The UN Emergency Resident Coordinator, Jan Egdland, has called for the establishment of humanitarian corridors in Lebanon, in particular to the ports of Beirut, Tripoli, and Tyre, to deliver humanitarian assistance to populations in need (UN OCHA, 24 July 2006).

The UN is mobilising funds for humanitarian relief, launching an appeal for \$150 million, but no concrete action has been taken at the political level. An emergency summit between EU and Arab nations as well as the US and Russia was held in Rome but only led to an agreement between the represented governments to work towards a sustainable truce (BBC, 27 June 2006). The US secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice visited the region to reiterate the Bush administration's opposition to an immediate ceasefire, despite warnings by the UN and some European governments that an "immediate cessation of hostilities" is the only way to avoid a dramatic humanitarian situation (The Guardian, 25 July 2006; UNSC, 20 July 2006). The UN has proposed a series of measures including an immediate cease fire, a strengthened international peacekeeping force and the release of the captured

Israeli soldiers as part of a prisoner exchange (UNSC, 20 July 2006). Israel has signalled it would be prepared to accept part of a UN proposal that a United Nations peacekeeping force be deployed in south Lebanon and has suggested that it will control an area in south Lebanon until such a force is deployed; however government representatives have said the Israeli offensive would continue (BBC, 25 July 2006).

As of 27 July, thousands of people continue to flee their homes on a daily basis within Lebanon. Up to one million people are expected to be internally displaced if military operations continue (UN News, 18 July 2006).

Note: The Lebanese civil war of 1975–1990 and Israeli invasions in 1978 and 1982 displaced a total of almost one million people. Information about civil war displaced in Lebanon is also available on the Lebanon country page <http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/lebanon>

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The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org

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