

Atrocities mount as Israel intensifies bombardment of Lebanon

Mike Head
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Openly backed and armed by the United States, Israel is carrying out mounting atrocities in Lebanon in an attempt to overcome unexpectedly fierce resistance from the Hezbollah movement. With its 17-day aerial bombardment having failed to wipe out Hezbollah, or weaken its support among the population, Israel has intensified its onslaught.

Internationally banned munitions designed to cause massive civilian casualties—including phosphorous, air-sucking bombs and cluster bombs—are being used to terrorise the Lebanese people, force a mass exodus of residents from south Lebanon and pulverise Hezbollah forces in preparation for a larger ground invasion.

In one of the latest war crimes, an Australian-organised convoy seeking to rescue 50 civilians from the village of Ramesh was fired upon by Israeli forces. Those wounded included a German TV cameraman and his driver, who were reporting from the rear of the convoy.

It was one of many attacks on reporters, indicating a concerted effort to hide the scale and ferocity of the assault from the people of the world, as well as from ordinary Israelis, whose media has largely blacked out coverage from inside Lebanon.

The targeting of news crews follows the deliberate bombing of the UN observation post at Khiam, killing four UN soldiers, which seems to have had the desired result of preventing UN monitoring of the carnage. The UN announced yesterday the withdrawal of a number of remaining posts along the Israeli-Lebanese border, citing safety reasons.

The initial war plans of the Kadima-Labour government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert are in disarray. Olmert had hoped for a relatively quick “shock and awe” victory by means of US-supplied warplanes and missiles. In the latest setback, after sustaining heavy losses, including eight deaths, Israeli troops have been forced to pull back from the key border town of Bint Jbeil, three days after claiming to have captured it.

In response to its losses, Israel has unleashed a murderous blitz aimed against the entire population of south Lebanon. After a cabinet meeting Thursday, the Olmert government suggested that anyone still living there was a combatant, and therefore a military target.

Army radio quoted a member of the security cabinet, saying: “We should raze the villages in south Lebanon if needed. The Israeli army is a long way from having won, and we have to change the rules of the game... The more time passes, the more it appears that the only solution is a massive incursion up to the Awali River [more than 60 kilometres north of the border] to destroy all the missile-launching sites.”

Even according to media reports, which give only a limited picture of the bombing, Israeli warplanes have pounded villages in southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, hitting more than 100 sites and killing at least 13 people on Friday. Warplanes repeatedly bombed hill villages near the southern port of Tyre, while hundreds of artillery rounds crashed across the border from Israel.

Aircraft lobbed more than 400 missiles and bombs on just one village, Khiam, where the UN post had been blown apart a day earlier. Also among the targets were an army base north of Beirut, a radio

communications centre and three trucks carrying medical and food supplies to the east.

The barrage has extended to the ancient port city of Tyre, where apartment buildings were blown apart on Thursday. In Tyre, Reuters reported: “Ghassan Farran, a doctor and head of a local cultural organization, gazes in disbelief at the pile of smoking ruins which was once his home. Minutes earlier, an Israeli jet dropped two guided missiles into the six-story apartment block in the centre of Tyre. ‘Look what America gives us, bombs and missiles,’ he said.”

Hundreds of people fled the Shiite border village of Aita al-Shaab to take refuge in the nearby Christian town of Rmeish, where some were reduced to drinking contaminated water from farm pools. “We are with the resistance,” a resident, Fatmeh Srour, told Reuters. “But we need supplies to remain steadfast. My three-month-old baby hasn’t eaten for two days because there’s no baby milk.” Aid workers said it was impossible to get medical supplies and food safely to such villages due to Israeli bombing.

The attacks have heightened the humanitarian catastrophe in the south, where Lebanese Civil Defence officials estimate up to 1,000 people may already have been killed in the first two weeks of the war.

Civil Defence member Abu Chadi in Tyre yesterday told the Lebanese *Daily Star*: “Just driving through the south, we see abandoned, burned-out cars with rotting bodies inside, but can’t reach them because when we try we are shot at by Israeli planes. A majority of the corpses that we have handled so far have been women and children.”

The newspaper reported that the number of fatalities so far had been “grossly underestimated,” according to paramedics and emergency response crews. Sami Yazbek, the head of Red Cross operations in Tyre, said: “In Tyre alone we had 125 dead and 150 missing or buried under the rubble. Those trapped under the rubble are impossible to reach due to the complete destruction of the roads in the south, so we have no choice but to presume they are dead by now.”

The *Daily Star* interviewed Ali Basma, 19, and his cousin Mohammed al-Samra, 20, who were hit by an Israeli missile as they rode a motorcycle in search of food for their families. “We were being very careful and checking the sky and listening carefully, and still we didn’t see the missile coming,” Basma said from his hospital bed in Tyre’s Najim Hospital, where he is recovering from multiple fractures. “They seem to hit anything moving now.”

As of July 28, at least 445 people, most of them civilians, have been confirmed killed in Lebanon, according to a Reuters tally. More than half of the casualties at the Beirut Government University Hospital were children of 15 years of age or less, according to hospital records.

“This is worse than during the Lebanese civil war,” Bilal Masri, assistant director of the Tyre hospital said, adding that so many children were becoming casualties because of the “widespread and indiscriminate nature of the bombings” and they “are least able to run away when the bombings commence.”

Lebanese Health Minister Mohammad Khalifeh said hospitals had received 401 bodies of people killed during the war. "On top of those victims, there are 150 to 200 bodies still under the rubble. We have not been able to pull them out because the areas they died in are still under fire," he said.

In a series of chilling reports, the International Committee of the Red Cross said bodies still lay in the streets in some isolated Lebanese border villages, where fighting has trapped unknown numbers of terrified civilians hiding in makeshift shelters. After the return of an aid mission to villages such as Bint Jbeil, Aitarun, Kfar Kila, Hula, Meiss el Jebel, Blida e Rmeish, the Red Cross warned that "health, water and food conditions are alarming."

"The water trucks are no longer capable of replenishing supplies in many inhabited centres and the pumps aren't working because there isn't any electricity, nor is there fuel... most generic medicines are also needed, especially those used to treat chronic pathologies."

Returning from Blida, a few kilometres from Bint Jbeil, a Red Cross officer said he saw some 700 people, including 300 children, seeking shelter in a mosque. "In other isolated villages the roads are deserted, the people are afraid to leave their homes because of the bombs, the corpses of the victims have not been removed from the streets and some are buried by the rubble."

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) said a food crisis was looming, as the fighting had destroyed roads and bridges and forced people to abandon their crops.

After an emergency cabinet meeting last weekend, the Lebanese government accused Israel of using "internationally prohibited weapons against civilians." Lebanese media reports stated that Israel used phosphorous incendiary bombs and vacuum bombs that suck up air and facilitate building collapses. The use of incendiary weapons against civilians has been banned by Protocol III to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons since 1980.

Jawad Najem, a surgeon at Tyre hospital, said patients had burns from phosphorous incendiary weapons. "Mahmoud Sarour, 14, was admitted to the hospital and treated for phosphorous burns to his face," Najem said. Mahmoud's 8-month-old sister, Maryam, suffered similar burns on her neck and hands when an Israeli rocket hit the family car. The children were with their father, mother and other relatives. Their father died instantly.

Bachir Cham, a Belgian-Lebanese doctor at the Southern Medical Centre in Sidon, received eight bodies after an Israeli air raid on nearby Rmeili. Cham said the bodies of some victims were "black as shoes, so they are definitely using chemical weapons. They are all black but their hair and skin is intact so they are not really burnt. It is something else."

Lebanese officials confirmed Israel's use of cluster bombs in several areas in the south, including the towns of Blida, Hebbariyeh and Kfarhamam. There are fears that many more people, particularly children, could die from coming into contact with unexploded cluster bomblets. The Lebanese *Daily Star* said a senior official within the Lebanese Army informed it that the military issued "warnings to citizens in the places bombed by Israel not to get near or touch suspicious bodies, which might be unexploded cluster bombs."

There is clear evidence of Israeli military efforts to block, intimidate and kill news reporters. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) expressed concern on July 27 over allegations by several television crews that Israeli warplanes had attacked them, effectively shutting down live television coverage from southeast Lebanon.

Crews from four Arab television stations told CPJ that Israeli aircraft fired missiles within 75 metres of them on July 22 to prevent them from covering the effects of Israel's bombardment around Khiam. Ghassan Benjeddou, Al-Jazeera's Lebanon bureau chief, said: "Israeli aircraft targeted in an air raid TV crews, especially Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya and Al-

Manar. It's a miracle that our crew survived the attack." The journalists said they managed to get away on back roads but the planes followed and again trapped the vehicles by firing missiles at the road ahead of them and behind them. "Their cars were clearly marked 'Press' and 'TV'," Nabil Khatib, executive editor of Al Arabiya, told CPJ.

While journalists based in Israel have generally been able to cover Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) operations (subject to Israeli military censorship), live television pictures of the Israeli operation along the border from the Lebanese side are now virtually impossible, journalists said. Broadcasters said a few individual TV journalists and media support staff remained in some southern Lebanese towns and villages, but getting TV footage out was extremely difficult.

Journalists said any vehicles, including TV vehicles, travelling between towns and villages were targeted by Israeli planes if spotted on the road. One journalist who ventured into the area was Loyal Najib, 23, a freelance photographer for the Lebanese magazine *Al-Jaras* and Agence France-Presse. She was killed July 23 by an Israeli missile while travelling in a taxi to cover Lebanese fleeing north. A day earlier, Suleiman al-Chidiac, a technician for the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC), was killed during Israeli air attacks on television transmitters and telephone towers in north Lebanon.

While admitting targeting Al-Manar, a satellite channel affiliated with Hezbollah, Israeli officials denied any deliberate attacks on journalists. Yet, there is a long record of such violence. In 2002, for example, during Israel's six-week military offensive in the West Bank, IDF declared nearly all of the main cities "closed military areas" and off-limits to the press. Journalists attempting to cover the action were frequently thwarted at checkpoints and the CPJ documented numerous instances in which troops fired on or in the direction of clearly identified journalists.

Authorities also detained and threatened members of the press, confiscated their credentials and film, and in some cases expelled them from the country. Troops raided, and at times temporarily occupied, media offices in the West Bank. In one case that drew widespread international media coverage, IDF troops hurled stun grenades and fired rubber bullets at reporters waiting outside the besieged Ramallah compound of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.



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