

Australian citizens left to face Israeli bombardment

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The Howard government has displayed a calculated indifference to the plight of the estimated 25,000 Australian citizens trapped by the Israel bombardment of Lebanon since July 12. In keeping with its unequivocal support for the Israeli assault, Canberra has acquiesced in the Israeli government's refusal to grant even limited ceasefires to allow the evacuation of Australian and other foreign nationals.

As of Friday morning, less than 500 of the terrified Lebanese-Australians living, studying, working, holidaying or visiting their families in the country had been given any assistance to escape the Israeli shelling. Some were taken by bus to Syria and some by ship to Cyprus. Many more had been forced to find their own way out, taking taxis or cars across bombed-out roads. Tens of thousands more are still desperately trying to flee southern Lebanon or Beirut. Others are out of contact, their plight unknown.

The contempt displayed by the Australian government toward the fate of the bombing's victims was highlighted on Thursday when about 400 people, including children, were left stranded on the docks or at a bus depot in Beirut after promised ferry ships failed to arrive. Already traumatised from witnessing bomb blasts, death and destruction, they were left waiting all day in the blazing sun with few facilities.

The same indifference has been shown toward the likely killing of Australian citizens by Israeli forces. According to an Australian man who fled the bloodshed in the southern Lebanese town of Aitaroun, where eight Canadian citizens were killed in an Israeli air raid, Australians also died there. But Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer dismissively declared that the government had no corroborating information. There was no suggestion of even investigating the report, let alone lodging a protest with Israel.

In the face of a growing public outcry, particularly among Australia's half a million citizens of Lebanese descent, Prime Minister John Howard went on Arab-language radio on Thursday to declare that his government had not "abandoned" those caught in Israel's war. Howard said he was insulted by claims that Australian Lebanese are being treated as second-class citizens because of their ethnic background.

However, the record shows that the government originally planned to do nothing to help its citizens. On July 15, three days after the onslaught on Lebanon began, Downer's parliamentary secretary Theresa Gambaro urged all Australians in Lebanon to stay where they were.

"There is no way at the moment for anyone to leave and the sea ports are dangerous, the road and the highways (have) been damaged and also the airport," she said. "There's no means, no transportation mode that is safe to us at the moment and in fact we would be putting

Australians at risk if we advised them to leave at this time."

Two days later, Downer was still ruling out calls for large-scale evacuations as "completely stupid" despite the fact that Italy, France, Sweden and Denmark had already chartered ships to rescue their citizens. By then, reports had appeared of desperate Australians being unable to even get through to the Australian embassy by telephone for days on end. The embassy's doors had been closed, and staff replaced with message recordings, websites and suggestions to call Canberra.

On July 18, amid mounting public criticism, Howard gave the ridiculous excuse that European countries had been able to move more quickly because "Australia is a long way from the Middle East". At the same time, he claimed that officials were "working overtime" to get people out.

Later that day, Downer announced that Israel had refused to provide a safe corridor for Australian visitors, including large families with children, trapped in southern Lebanon. Far from protesting this violation of the rules of war, Downer acted as Israel's apologist, saying the country could not agree to the request because they "didn't want to allow Hezbollah to either consolidate or escape".

Downer further insinuated that those under bombardment had only themselves to blame for visiting areas where there is strong support for Hezbollah. He urged Australians to stay away from "Hezbollah infrastructure". How people were supposed to identify "Hezbollah infrastructure," Downer did not say. The Islamist movement operates hospitals, schools, local government offices, news services and reconstruction projects across south Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley.

Downer's remarks were made under conditions of Israel's criminal bombing campaign, which was ripping Lebanon "to shreds" in the words of Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora. In addition to homes, roads, bridges and basic infrastructure across Lebanon, the official Israeli "target list" had extended to all trucks and buses on the roads.

Australian officials in Lebanon now say they are hoping to evacuate 500 to 1,000 Australian citizens from Beirut today, with another 6,000 to be ferried out in six ships over the next few days. Downer, however, has insisted that he cannot give any guarantees that the ships will turn up.

Throughout the three-week Israeli offensive, first against the Palestinian territories of Gaza and the West Bank, then Lebanon, the Howard government has closely echoed the positions of the Bush administration, giving a green light for the bloody operation to continue.

Like Bush, Howard has repeatedly accused Hezbollah of instigating the conflict. In fact, the Israeli government seized upon Hezbollah's kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers as a pretext to unleash long-prepared plans to pulverise Lebanon and its people. Howard has also

branded Hezbollah as the “plaything of Syria,” seeking to help justify the wider US-backed war aims of striking against Syria and Iran.

The connection between this underlying agenda of subjugating the entire Middle East, and Canberra’s contempt for the Lebanese Australians caught in the war zone, was made plain in the July 19 editorial in the *Australian*, Rupert Murdoch’s national daily.

“For better or worse, the current conflict represents a realignment in the Middle East’s balance of power,” it declared. It admitted that, “amid the volleys and counter-volleys of rockets, it is hard not to feel sympathy for the several hundred Australian citizens trapped in south Lebanon”. But, it insisted, “travelling to a region administered by a terrorist organisation with a long habit of taking pokes at its powerful southern neighbour carries risks.”

In other words, anyone visiting an area where the majority of the population politically supports a movement that resists Israel’s constant US-backed expansionism and violence is fair game. While branded a terrorist organisation by Washington and its allies, Hezbollah is a political party whose Resistance and Development Bloc won 80 percent of the vote in south Lebanon last year, has 35 MPs in the 128-member Lebanese parliament and ministers in the cabinet of Siniora’s “national unity” government.

The editorial sums up one of the essential purposes of the war—to terrorise the masses of Lebanon and the entire region and crush any opposition to Israeli and US militarism.

What this means for innocent civilians was raised by several Australians waiting at a Beirut bus depot on Thursday for an evacuation ship that never materialised.

A Sydney woman, May Nicholas, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* the depot facilities were limited, with little water and few toilets. “We are standing here and we can hear bombs and see the planes. I’ve just been waiting for my name to be called to get on a bus,” she said. With her daughter Anne, she had left the southern Lebanese city of Saida early Wednesday and was driven by an uncle to Beirut along a dangerous mountain road for six hours. Now they had nowhere to go. “I don’t know what we’ll do. We can’t go back to Saida. I’ll die there. It’s being bombed,” Nicholas said.

Vanessa Mourad, of Rockdale, who was with her husband, Samer, told of the death of 27 people in Aitaroun. She said her family had been advised by the Australian embassy to remain in their homes, but fear of what they could see and hear took over. “A bomb would fall 200 metres that way; and another 100 metres the other way,” she said.

“We think more are dead in collapsed buildings, but there was nothing to dig them out with. Grandparents were buried alive and children are dead, including a family of six. Word flew around that we had two minutes to get out—this grey bag and these dirty clothes are all I have. People were crying and running—we were too scared.”

A day earlier, a Sydney TAFE teacher, Peter Smith, 43, who is visiting his mother, Salwa, in Beirut, said he had been trying to get through to the Australian embassy for six days but there had been no answer. He called Canberra to get the forms needed for evacuation. When he went to the embassy, he asked about buses and was told there were none. “They told me there were flights from Damascus every day but you have to get there on your own.”

Australian-born Dalida Saliba, who arrived in Lebanon three weeks ago with her two children, said an embassy official told her to decide within five seconds if she was prepared to travel to Beirut port—a risky journey—to join others waiting to be evacuated to Turkey. “I said to him ... ‘I can’t give you an answer in five seconds, I’ve got my kids’ lives in my hands’,” Saliba told the *Australian* by phone from Sin al-

Fil, east of Beirut. “He said, ‘You’ve got five seconds’. He counted down five seconds, ‘Five, four, three, two, one’ and that was it ... he hung up on me.”

Leaders of Sydney’s Lebanese community called a media conference on Wednesday to denounce the Australian government’s slowness to act as “shameful”. A spokesman Shaoquett Moselmane said: “Rather than use its Australian mission in Beirut to put in place an immediate action plan, the federal government decides to shut all embassy doors and run for cover. And leave thousands of bewildered Aussies calling in desperation only to be answered by an answering machine.”

The Howard government’s disregard for the lives of Australians in Lebanon is in line with its treatment of Lebanese-Australians at home. For months, Howard, backed to the hilt by the Labor government in the state of New South Wales, has been seeking to whip up anti-Islamic and anti-Arab prejudice, branding local youth from the Middle East as hoodlums, criminals and even “urban terrorists”.

Last December, this communal witchhunting produced a racist riot at Sydney’s Cronulla Beach, in which drunken mobs attacked anyone of a Middle Eastern appearance. This foul campaign serves both to justify domestic police repression and prepare public opinion for further military interventions against Arab and Islamic governments.

This week, amid the horror of the events in Lebanon, the NSW opposition leader, Peter Debnam, who heads Howard’s party at the state level, declared that if he won the scheduled state election next March he would immediately order the police to round up “200 Middle Eastern thugs” allegedly connected to revenge attacks after the Cronulla riots, regardless of whether they could be convicted of any offence.

If elected, “at dawn ... on the 25th of March, my instruction to the police commissioner will be to take as many police as you need and charge them with anything to get them off the streets,” he said. “The message I’ll be giving the police commissioner is take as many police as you want [and] get in their face.”

This demand for lawless police action against working class youth is of a piece with the Howard government’s complicity in Israel’s war crimes in Gaza and Lebanon—the collective punishment of entire populations, the clear targetting of civilians and the devastation of non-military infrastructure such as airports, harbours, power stations, water supplies and government offices.

This has been facilitated by the Australian media, which has uniformly presented Israel’s aggression as “self-defence”, and the Labor Party’s bipartisan backing for the Israeli war aims. As has become customary on every major issue, federal Labor leader Kim Beazley and his foreign affairs spokesman Kevin Rudd have lined up completely behind Howard and Downer.

In an interview with the *Australian Jewish News* yesterday, Beazley emphatically identified himself with Israel, saying, “You are not alone” and accusing the Hamas government in the Palestinian territories, Hezbollah and Syria of mounting a “serious threat to Israel”. Interviewed a day earlier, Rudd also charged Iran with fuelling the crisis.



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