

Official US callousness leaves thousands stranded in Lebanon

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After a week of Israeli air strikes on Lebanon, laying siege to cities and towns in the south of the country, thousands of Americans and other foreign nationals remain trapped along with the Lebanese population, at the mercy of the brutal assault and blockade by the US client state.

The Bush administration and embassy officials have expressed their utter lack of interest in the fate of American citizens, caught in the middle of a war of aggression launched with the approval of the US government and which the latter is openly promoting. Washington has played a leading role in the world diplomatic arena in preventing a ceasefire in the conflict, further endangering the lives of its citizens.

As of Tuesday evening, only an estimated 320 Americans had been evacuated from Lebanon, including 120 ferried by military helicopter to Cyprus. Lebanon's only international airport has been shut since Israeli jets bombed its three runways last week.

About 25,000 Americans are estimated to be in Lebanon this summer, including tourists, business travelers, students and permanent residents. Of these, anywhere from 8,000 to 15,000 have indicated to the US embassy their desire to leave since fighting began between Israel and Hezbollah last week. The exact number is difficult to determine as those seeking to contact the embassy by phone, email or fax repeatedly get busy signals or no response.

CNN reported receiving an email from an American identifying herself as Kellee from Los Angeles, who wrote that she and her father were vacationing in Lebanon when the air strikes began last week: "We were set to leave the 14th of July, but since the bombings are stuck in Lebanon. We find ourselves like the Lebanese people: hostages, terrorized by Israeli bombs, with nobody to defend us. We are frantically

awaiting relief from the U.S. Embassy."

Natalie Kerlakian of Denver, Colorado, also wrote to CNN: "The lines are constantly busy [at the US Embassy], and if you are lucky to get through, they put you on hold. All the other countries have or are in the process of evacuating their citizens, and we are still waiting. I hope this response will be better than that of Katrina." This comment is entirely to the point. The government is showing precisely as much concern for its citizens in Lebanon as it did for the affected residents of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama during and after the devastating hurricane last summer.

Not only has the Bush administration made no demands on Israel to hold back on its military assault until American civilians can be evacuated from Lebanon, it has proceeded at a remarkably slow pace in putting into place any plan to remove US citizens from harm's way. It was not until Sunday that a 17-person assessment team arrived at the American Embassy in Beirut to prepare the evacuation. The team was sent by the US Central Command, which oversees military operations in the Middle East and Central Asia.

The Pentagon has chartered the 750-passenger Orient Queen, a Greek cruise ship, as the main means by which to ferry evacuees from Beirut to Cyprus. The ship was due to arrive some time Tuesday night, but it was unlikely to board any passengers until daytime Wednesday. The US has discouraged Americans from leaving Lebanon by road crossings with Syria.

US Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman said 1,000 Americans were expected to leave Wednesday and that by the end of the week the evacuation would proceed at a pace of about 1,000 Americans a day. The US was also reportedly considering chartering other ships, although neither the Pentagon nor the embassy would elaborate.

In another cruel twist, panicked American evacuees are also reportedly being required to *pay an unspecified cost* for their passage out of the country or to sign forms agreeing in advance to reimburse the fees! The *Guardian* reported that some said they had been told they would not be allowed to travel on their US passports until they had repaid the money. No other governments were known to be placing such outrageous demands on their citizens.

Some European countries seemed to be doing a better job of evacuation. As of Tuesday, Italy and France had evacuated more than 1,000 people between them. Denmark had begun evacuating 2,300 of its citizens.

Sweden, with about 5,000 in Lebanon, had chartered three ships and had already brought 850 people to Cyprus. The Hual Transporter, one of the ships chartered by Sweden, left Beirut Tuesday evening with 1,000 Scandinavians and other Europeans, as well as 200 Americans.

The US embassy, meanwhile, sent a message to citizens in the country that it was monitoring the situation closely and “reviewing all options for assisting Americans who wish to depart Lebanon,” but told them “not to move” until contacted by the embassy. They have been told to wait for a phone call that could come in hours—or even days. Thomas Miller, a spokesman for the US Embassy in Cyprus, said it might be a week or more before the evacuation effort is fully under way.

One of the most elementary obligations of any government is the safeguarding of the welfare of its citizens both at home and abroad. For the Bush administration, however, the evacuation of thousands of Americans from Lebanon is a matter of no great consequence, particularly in relation to its alliance with Israel and its overall plans for Middle East domination.

Under conditions where no viable evacuation plan has been implemented, stories fill US newspapers of stranded students, vacationers and others who have been unable to receive any assistance from American authorities.

Jonathan Chakhtoura, a 19-year-old Lebanese-American student from Boston, had registered with the embassy but had not heard back for three days except for an email acknowledging his registration.

Jonathan told Associated Press, “Every time I call to see what’s going on the lines are busy. When they

answer, they say they don’t know. I am extremely disappointed. A lot of people don’t know what is going on. There is so much confusion.”

Linda Sayed, a 26-year-old graduate student from New York, had been vacationing in Lebanon with her parents, brother and sister. Since arriving in the country, her parents and 15-year-old brother had traveled south to Bint Jbeil, on the border with Israel.

Since the fighting broke out, her brother and parents have been living in a bomb shelter and Linda and her sister have been unable to contact them. Linda told the *Los Angeles Times* that she contacted the United Nations, UNICEF and the Red Cross, but she cannot reach her family. She called the US Embassy, but could not get through.

A student from Rutgers University in New Jersey studying Arabic at the American University of Beirut also spoke to the *LA Times*. “I’m freaked out that our government is treating us this way,” she said, not wanting to give her name out of fear that she might be removed from the passenger list in retaliation for criticizing the US evacuation effort. “Are we in a Third World country or what?” she asked.



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