

Israel prepares to launch ground war in Lebanon

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With Washington's backing, Israel is preparing to launch a ground invasion of Lebanon, having called up thousands of army reservists and massed tanks and armoured personnel carriers on the border.

In ten days of bombings, Israel has already killed more than 350 civilians, driven half a million people from their homes and destroyed much of the country's infrastructure. Now it plans to intensify its offensive to subjugate southern Lebanon.

The American television network CNBC reported that, according to intelligence sources, an Israeli ground invasion was imminent. A military source said more than 3,000 reservists had been called up. Israeli Army Radio said the drive could involve six battalions, which might mean up to 6,000 soldiers. Such a force would be one of the biggest assembled by Israel since it invaded Lebanon in 1982.

Israel Defence Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff Dan Halutz told reporters in Tel Aviv on Friday that any military incursion into Lebanon would be "limited" in scope but could last for "weeks."

Israel's Kadima-Labor government is proceeding with the clear backing of the Bush administration, with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice rejecting renewed calls for a ceasefire so as to give the Israeli military more time to carry through its plans.

Israel dropped leaflets across southern Lebanon warning civilians to leave towns and villages "immediately" and head north toward Beirut. The Israelis have been using radio broadcasts, combined with intimidating late-night telephone recordings and text messages, to urge residents to flee beyond the Litani River, which flows 20-40 kilometres north of the Israeli border.

Families with possessions packed into cars and pickup trucks clogged roads to the north. An estimated

300,000 mostly Shia Muslim Lebanese normally reside south of the Litani. It is impossible to estimate how many have already fled the bombing and fighting of the past 10 days.

Air raids have wrecked many roads and bridges in the region and continue to do so even as people try to flee. IDF spokesmen said humanitarian escape corridors would be established, but Israel Air Force (IAF) warplanes pounded the country's main road link to Syria with missiles and set three passenger buses ablaze on Friday, Lebanese police said. In the mountains of central Lebanon on the Beirut-Damascus highway Friday, IAF jets fired four missiles into a bridge linking two steep mountain peaks. Part of the bridge collapsed, after having been hit several times previously by Israeli bombs. The passenger buses set on fire were at Taanayel in the Bekaa Valley, about 15 kilometres from the Syrian border, on the Beirut-Damascus road.

The IDF call-up came a day after Defence Minister Amir Peretz, the leader of the Labor Party, spoke of a possible land offensive. "Let no terror organisation feel we would cower from any operation," he said. "We have no intention of conquering Lebanon, but if we have to act to complete our tasks and reach a victory we will do it."

The Israeli general commanding the forces fighting on the Lebanese front made clear that the offensive would continue, regardless of the civilian toll. "We must change our way of thinking. Human life is of supreme value, but this is a demanding operation, and we are at war," Major General Udi Adam declared in remarks shown on Israeli television. "War costs human lives—look how many civilians have been killed. I suggest we don't count the dead until it's all over."

According to a report in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, the ground war had already commenced when

the IDF sent thousands of troops into southern Lebanon on Thursday. The Israeli army also confirmed some of its troops had been operating in Lebanon for days.

An official from the United Nations monitoring force in south Lebanon told the Associated Press in Beirut that between 300 and 500 Israeli troops were believed to be in the western sector of south Lebanon, backed by as many as 30 tanks. These operations, purportedly seeking Hezbollah positions, rocket stores and bunkers, have faced serious resistance. Five IDF soldiers were killed on Thursday, one of them in a collision between two Israeli helicopters.

US Secretary of State Rice effectively gave the green light for a prolonged onslaught. There were no “quick fixes” to the crisis, she said, and once again blamed Hezbollah and its supporters for plunging the entire Middle East into war. “It is unacceptable to have a situation where the decision of a terrorist group can drag an entire country, even an entire region, into violence,” she said.

Rice said that an immediate ceasefire would be a “false promise” unless the “root cause” of the violence was addressed. By root cause, Washington does not mean Israel’s long history of terrorism and annexation, but the resistance of the Arab masses and the support for Hezbollah from Syria and Iran.

To head off calls at the United Nations Security Council for an end to the hostilities, Rice announced that she would depart on Monday for a round of diplomacy that will include visits to Israel and Italy. She will hold talks with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, but pointedly excluded Syria from her program, and also Lebanon, whose prime minister, Fouad Siniora, has pleaded for an immediate ceasefire to halt the destruction of his country.

Although the Lebanese army has stayed out of the fighting so far, some 20 Lebanese soldiers have been killed in Israeli strikes on their bases.

IAF planes stepped up the bombardment of south Lebanon on Friday, particularly a border region where Israeli soldiers and guerrillas fought pitched battles on Thursday evening. A house in the border town of Aitaroun was flattened, with 10 people believed inside, but rescue workers could not reach it because of artillery shelling, security officials said.

The heightened shelling intensified the humanitarian

disaster across the region. “The siege on Lebanon is not letting humanitarian aid in,” said Hisham Hassan, spokesman for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). “The south is isolated,” he added.

Two ICRC trucks were on their way from Beirut to a hospital in Tyre, where staff began burying corpses temporarily in a mass grave dug in an army barracks to clear space in the morgue.

Israeli forces have also continued their attacks in the Gaza Strip over the past 24 hours. Israeli tank fire hit the home of a Hamas militant, killing him and three members of his family, according to Palestinian security officials.

Thousands of demonstrators across the Middle East used Friday’s Islamic day of prayer to again protest Israel’s attacks and the complicity of Arab leaders who have denounced Hezbollah and refused to condemn Israel. Thousands gathered after the main weekly religious service at Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo, Egypt. In Jordan, some 2,000 protesters marched in downtown Amman.

There were also more antiwar demonstrations in Israel, with a major protest planned for Tel Aviv today.



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