

UN Human Rights Commissioner warns of war crimes in Lebanon

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The statement by United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour that war crimes may have been committed in the Lebanon conflict was deliberately couched in diplomatic terms.

Arbour took pains to identify both Israel and Hezbollah as potentially guilty parties. Nevertheless, there was little doubt that her target was Tel Aviv, and her warning that liability for war crimes is not restricted to the military, but extends to politicians who approve their operations was also meant to be heard by Israel's political backers in Washington and London.

Her reference to the "scale of killings in the region," and "the supreme obligations to protect civilians" under international law could only be directed at Israel, given the massive and disproportionate violence it has meted out.

No one would suggest that the UN has any intention of considering prosecution against any senior or military figure in Israel, let alone from the United States or Britain.

There has been speculation as to whether or not Israel can be brought to trial because it does not recognise bodies such as the International Criminal Court and is not a signatory to Treaty of Rome. It hardly needs adding that Washington demonstrates a similar disdain for such international institutions.

But the fact remains that millions throughout the world believe that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair should face war crimes charges. And Arbour is fully aware of the outrage and disgust that has been aroused internationally by the appalling destruction heaped upon the Lebanese people by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) with the unconditional backing of the US and Britain.

Arbour is in fact acting as friendly counsel, advising

the Israeli, US and British governments that they are setting in motion forces that are not under their control.

Without at least making such a warning, the stench of hypocrisy that pervades international politics—when only those who fall foul of Washington such as Slobodan Milosevic and Saddam Hussein face human rights charges—would be overwhelming.

Israel's actions in the Lebanon are in clear contravention of the 1949 Geneva Convention. Article 51 of the First Protocol states, "The civilian population as such, as well as individual civilians, shall not be the object of attack." Article 52 states, "Attacks shall be limited strictly to military objectives..."

As Arbour explained, "Indiscriminate shelling of cities constitutes a foreseeable and unacceptable targeting of civilians.

"Similarly, the bombardment of sites with alleged military significance, but resulting invariably in the killing of innocent civilians, is unjustifiable."

Israel has no defence against such charges. Its claim to be targeting Hezbollah and a supposed infrastructure of terrorism is obscene, given the scale of its actions against the entire Lebanese people.

Lebanon has been subjected to a total sea and air blockade, leaving its population of 3.5 million unable to seek any refuge from a daily bombardment by aircraft, tanks and gunboats.

Well over 300 people have been killed and thousands injured—many of them children.

Israel's offensive began with the systematic destruction of Lebanon's infrastructure, including its only international airport, power plants, water treatment facilities, roads and bridges. But it was not long before it began shelling the predominantly Shia neighbourhoods in Beirut, claiming that every house was potentially sheltering Hezbollah fighters. This is

Tel Aviv's pathetic attempt to justify attacks on civilian targets with claims that they have a "dual use."

Amidst the occasional strike on actual Hezbollah facilities, thousands of homes have been destroyed in one of the most densely populated areas of Lebanon. Reporters allowed to visit the area speak of it having been "laid waste" and "pummeled."

One report described how "Eight-or nine-storey buildings had their façades blown out by blasts; others lean forward as if about to fall. Sofas, mattresses, toys, books and every personal possession imaginable litter the streets among chunks of concrete, twisted metal and blown-out window frames. Electrical cables dangle everywhere. Walking through it all is treacherous."

On Thursday evening, the Israeli Air Force dropped 23 tons of explosives on the Bourj al-Barajneh suburb, with two dozen jets using special burrowing bombs. The explanation offered by Israel was that it was seeking to kill Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah. This is merely seeking to justify one war crime with another. Like the US, Israel has an official policy of assassinating its political opponents. But this is illegal under international law.

The claim that Israel is targeting Hezbollah has been used to sanction attacks on civilians throughout southern Lebanon—an offensive that amounts to ethnic cleansing. It is a staggering fact that official estimates are of 500,000 internally displaced people in the country, fully a seventh of the entire population.

Israel has now dropped leaflets throughout the area warning residents to leave their homes as it is going to attack. There are widespread predictions that a ground invasion is imminent. Once again, the leaflets are meant as proof that it is seeking to minimise civilian casualties. In reality, all they achieve is to spread fear and alarm. Just where is anyone supposed to go when all borders have been sealed and many roads have been destroyed? Where is a safe haven when the entire country is under attack?

There are, moreover, numerous reports of deliberate attacks on those fleeing areas targeted by the IDF. On July 15, a convoy of civilians was bombed as it tried to escape the southern Lebanese village of Marwahin, killing some 20 people. The IDF had warned local residents to evacuate and then bombed the only direct route out of the area. Photographs showed bodies incinerated and mutilated by the blasts.

In another incident, when Jamhour electricity station was targeted by Israeli jets, rescue workers rushing to the scene to help the injured were bombed.

Lebanon's Prime Minister Fouad Siniora said Friday that the IDF were also targeting ambulances and medical convoys. Israel's onslaught was "no longer against Hezbollah, it is an attack against the Lebanese and Lebanon," he said. It could not be otherwise. Israeli and US propaganda routinely depicts Hezbollah as a tightly knit terrorist outfit that is nothing more than a front organisation for Syrian and Iranian influence in Lebanon.

Washington in particular makes cynical claim to be concerned with preserving the democratic government of Lebanon against those who seek its destruction. Hezbollah is, in fact, part of that government. It is Lebanon's largest single political party with mass support amongst the Shia population that predominates in the south. It has two government ministers, and 23 MPs who are part of a 35-strong opposition grouping. As well as its parliamentary presence, Hezbollah runs a range of social services, including hospitals and schools, on which hundreds of thousands rely.

The forces that are actually seeking to topple a democratically elected government are not to be found in Damascus and Tehran, but in Washington, Tel Aviv and London. These are the real architects of an illegal war of aggression to bring about regime change.

The Bush administration has given Israel carte blanche to perpetrate war crimes, even when the lives of its own citizens are threatened. This is the clear implication of the remarks by US Ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, when asked to comment on the deaths of eight Canadian citizens in an Israeli air strike July 16.

Bolton insisted that there was no "moral equivalence" between those killed in Lebanon and in Israel. The deaths of Israelis were the result of "malicious terrorist acts." The deaths of civilians in Lebanon "were sad and highly unfortunate consequences of [Israeli] self-defence," he said.



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