

Europe to send 7,000 troops to Lebanon

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31 August 2006

Europe will provide the backbone of the force currently being assembled by the United Nations to supervise the ceasefire in Lebanon. This was decided last Friday at a meeting of the European Union's 25 foreign ministers in Brussels, and 3,500 troops are due to arrive in Lebanon this week. Altogether, the European Union countries have agreed to make about 7,000 soldiers available for deployment on the ground, with a further 2,000 to provide marine and air support. It is the largest military deployment carried out in the history of the European Union.

The biggest contingent (3,000 soldiers) comes from Italy, which will take over command of the UN force in February next year. France, which has command of the existing UN observation mission in the region, is sending 2,000 troops and will retain command until then Spain has agreed to send 1,200 troops; Poland, 500; Belgium, 400; and Finland, 250.

Germany, Great Britain, Denmark and Greece will also take part, but will not send ground forces. Germany has offered to send naval units (between 1,200 to 1,500 men) to guard the Lebanese coast and prevent any weapons from reaching Hezbollah. Great Britain plans to send six Jaguar planes and two AWACS reconnaissance aircraft, as well as making its military basis in Cyprus available for the mission.

On Monday, the Turkish government also announced its intention to participate in the UN force but gave no concrete figures, although media reports indicate it will contribute approximately 1,000 soldiers. Such an intervention, however, is highly controversial in Turkey and the parliament in Ankara must first approve it. The body already voted down Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's proposal to allow the US military to use Turkish territory for its war against Iraq.

UN resolution 1701, which was passed in the middle of August, envisaged a force comprising 15,000 men in Lebanon, but it is not clear whether or not this figure will actually be reached. A number of non-European countries have signalled their support, but their contributions are likely to be more symbolic than material in character. In any event, Europe will provide the mainstay of the force.

The UN force will be intervening in a country that was devastated by the 34-day bombardment carried out by Israeli forces. The Israeli siege has cost the lives of an estimated 1,200 Lebanese, mainly civilians. Villages have been flattened; roads, bridges, power stations, water plants, airports and petrol stations have been destroyed. Thousands of unexploded cluster bombs provide a continuing threat to the population, and oil pollution has devastated the coastline. All this has taken place in a geographically tiny area with a population of less than 4 million

inhabitants.

Lebanon had only just begun to recover from the 15-year civil war which ended in 1990 and the Israeli occupation of the south of the country. Now, according to the figures of the Lebanese council for development and reconstruction, 80 percent of the infrastructure in the south and the east of the country has been destroyed. The total damage has been estimated at a cost of at least \$6 billion. The repair of the estimated 7,100 destroyed dwellings alone would cost \$1.4 billion. The tourist industry, which had picked up in past years and is the country's most important source of foreign income, has come to a complete halt.

There has not been a word of criticism from European capitals of this barbaric aggression, which patently violates international law and had been prepared over a long period of time by Israel with American support. Instead, Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni has received a warm welcome in the course of her tour of European capitals aimed at discussing the details of the deployment force.

Israel and the US had only agreed to a ceasefire when it was clear that the Israeli army had failed through military means to achieve its aim of smashing the Hezbollah movement, which has deep roots in the Lebanese population. Both countries now expect the UN force to take up this task and disarm the Hezbollah militia. In the course of her European tour, Livni made quite that Israel was quite prepared to renew its attacks on Lebanon should Hezbollah retain its weapons.

In Europe, fears that the war could reignite, leaving European forces between the two opposing fronts, led to temporary hesitation regarding the implementation of the UN resolution. France, which had played a leading role in formulating the ceasefire resolution and had been expected to provide the "backbone" of the UN force, only offered 400 soldiers initially, thereby threatening the entire deployment.

Paris demanded a more precise mandate with regard to the task to be carried out by the force. In particular, it sought to ensure that the UN troops would not be made responsible for the forcible disarmament of Hezbollah. In the meantime, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has given this assurance: the disarmament of Hezbollah planned in the UN resolution is to be carried out by the Lebanese government and through political means.

Israel is also no longer insisting on the immediate disarmament of Hezbollah. In Berlin, Foreign Minister Livni said that the success of the international force in the initial stages depended upon working with the Lebanese army to prevent the smuggling of arms to Hezbollah. The disarmament of the movement would constitute a second, more difficult step.

This does not remove the danger of a reigniting of the war, however. So far Hezbollah has refused to agree to voluntarily give up its weapons. Even if a political agreement with the Lebanese government were possible (indications that such a deal would be possible were given by a recent conciliatory television interview by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah), it could take the form of integrating the Hezbollah militia into the Lebanese army. With Israel and the US intent on the complete subordination of Lebanon to their own interests, it is hardly likely they would accept such a solution.

The risks of renewed fighting, therefore, remain. Nevertheless, Europe was eventually swayed in favour of an intervention because it provides an opportunity for European powers to assert their military presence in the Middle East under conditions where the US had dominated in the region following its war and occupation in Iraq. Following the problematic result of the Lebanon campaign for Israel and the US, European powers now see a chance of playing a greater role in the region. This has been made clear by statements justifying its commitment to Lebanon by the Italian government in particular.

In response to the question: “What is at stake in Lebanon?” the Italian foreign minister, Massimo D’Alema, told the *Frankfurt Rundschau*: “It is a great opportunity for Europe, which has never had a large presence in the Middle East and mainly paid for everything, but was never recognized as a principal player.”

D’Alema is a leading member of the Left Democrats, which emerged from the Italian Communist Party. In Italy’s recent election campaign the Left Democrats had criticized the predecessor government of Silvio Berlusconi because of its support for the US-led war in Iraq. Italy’s new government under Romano Prodi has since withdrawn Italian soldiers from Iraq.

It is now clear, however, that the problem for Italy was not the stationing of Italian forces in the Middle East, but rather their political subordination to the US. Only three months after taking office the new government has organised the biggest Italian military deployment since the Second World War, acting to secure the imperialist interests of Italy and Europe.

In this respect, D’Alema is absolutely clear. When asked by the *F.A.Z.* newspaper how “the new scenario of international policy should look,” he answered, “It concerns a contribution to peace in an environment where neither the United Nations nor Europe has much influence. There is neither a role for the United Nations or for the European Union in the Iraq scenario. Now we cannot afford to miss this new opportunity.”

D’Alema also hopes that through the Lebanon deployment European foreign policy will play a greater role in the Mediterranean region and increase Italy’s weight. He told the *F.A.Z.* he believes “that Europe must pay much more attention to the Mediterranean area. During the past years Europe has been much concerned about the extension toward the east and that is understandable. But in so doing its obligations in the Mediterranean were neglected.”

Following Italy’s initiative, and after hectic diplomatic activities between Paris, Rome, Berlin, Washington, Tel Aviv, Beirut and the UN headquarters in New York, the French president Jacques Chirac also finally agreed to a larger contingent. This step is also

justified in Paris as being in the interests of France and Europe in the region.

In a speech to diplomats Chirac expressed his hope that in future Europe will play a stronger role on the international stage. He regrets, he said, that Europe “had been too absent in the Lebanese crisis” The French foreign minister, Philippe Douste Blazy, explained to *Le Figaro* that in Lebanon, “the defence of our values and the retention of our own ability to think and act” were at stake.

It can already be said with some certainty, given the very one-sided backing of Israel, that the European intervention will not bring peace to a battered Lebanon.

Germany in particular has openly acknowledged its partisanship for Israel. According to Berlin, any situation in which Germans could confront Israeli soldiers must be ruled out for historical reasons. At the same time, increasingly aggressive terminology is being employed in Berlin. The German defence minister, Franz Josef Jung, insists on describing the envisaged blockade of the Lebanese coast carried out by the German navy as a “combat mission” The term is clearly provocative. Its use has been carefully avoided in connection with previous German military deployments, which have always been described in terms of defensive engagements.

The notion that Europe could liberate itself from American supremacy through its military intervention in the Middle East could also prove to be mistaken.

Shocked by the chaos which the US has brought about in Iraq, and by the increasing popularity enjoyed by the Hezbollah movement due to its resistance against Israel, the Europeans have repeatedly stressed their intention of “stabilizing” the Middle East. However, as D’Alema himself noted as he wondered out loud how to “restrain radicals and extremists” and “promote moderate forces” in Iraq, “The idea that one can stop terrorism with war, and afterwards comes peace and democracy, was obviously not successful.”

Wars have their own dynamic. As soon as the UN force is located in Lebanon and becomes involved in any conflicts—and such conflicts can easily be provoked—then the situation can quickly spin out of control. Then the European forces would face the same fate as the Americans in Iraq—an escalating spiral of violence and retaliation—and end up once again in the wake of the US.



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