

# Refugees flood back to devastated southern Lebanon

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Hundreds of thousands of refugees have returned to what is left of their homes in Lebanon in defiance of Israeli warnings and threats to stay away. Openly expressing their support for Hezbollah, residents have rushed to reclaim their land in a display of mass opposition to US-Israeli aggression.

Developments since the UN-sponsored ceasefire took effect on Monday have underscored the failure of the US and Israel to achieve their war aims. The Bush administration and the Israeli government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert hoped to destroy the Hezbollah militia, reduce Lebanon to the status of a semi-colonial protectorate, and drive out the predominantly Shiite population from an Israeli-occupied “buffer zone” in the south.

None of this has eventuated. Lebanese refugees have made their way past destroyed roads and bridges, despite the dangers posed by unexploded cluster munitions and other ordinance, to return to their land. People fear becoming permanent refugees and losing their homeland to Israeli annexation, and are determined not to suffer what the Palestinians experienced. The Lebanese population has first-hand knowledge of the Israeli dispossession of Palestinians—hundreds of thousands of refugees flooded into the country in 1948 and again in 1967.

Returning refugees angrily denounced Israel and the US for the destruction wreaked during the 34-day bombardment. In Beirut’s southern suburbs, almost every building was either destroyed or seriously damaged. Over the ruins of one collapsed structure, a resident hung a banner which read, “Made in the USA”. Another banner in a southern Lebanese village had the words, “Rice, they will not see your new Middle East”. This was a reference to US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s now infamous statement on July 22 in Beirut that the war represented the “birth pangs of a new Middle East”.

Almost one million people—a quarter of Lebanon’s population—were forced to flee their homes during the conflict. According to Lebanese estimates, Israeli warplanes carried out more than 4,500 bombing raids. An estimated

35,000 homes and businesses were destroyed by missiles and artillery shells, along with 400 miles of roads and highways, and about 150 bridges and interchanges, one out of every four in the country.

“Southern Lebanon is a travelogue of destruction: town after town pummelled by bombs and mortars that left them in shambles,” the *Los Angeles Times* reported. Entire towns and villages have been turned to rubble. In Siddiqine, local businessman Ali Bakri described the scene. “It’s like a tsunami, or a second Hiroshima,” he told the *Christian Science Monitor*.

Almost 1,200 Lebanese were killed, though this figure will probably rise, as corpses are still being pulled from the rubble of destroyed buildings. In Srifa, scene of two Israeli massacres of civilians, another 32 bodies have been recovered. Authorities in Tyre yesterday buried more than 120 victims in a mass grave. In Ainata, Red Cross workers found 18 bodies, including children. The stench of decomposing bodies forced rescue workers to wear multiple facemasks as they travelled between Ainata and Bint Jbeil, scene of much of the heaviest fighting.

Hezbollah militants have openly re-emerged in the south and their banners and flags are again visible to Israeli residents living on the border. Refugees flew Hezbollah flags from their vehicles and homes and expressed their determination to resist Israeli aggression against their country. Numerous media reports have acknowledged the mass support Hezbollah now enjoys. “We are not terrorists,” Faras Jamil, a 39-year-old resident of Aita Shaab, told the *Los Angeles Times*. “My wife is Hezbollah. My children are Hezbollah. Hezbollah is all the people from this town.”

The demonstrations exposed the US-Israeli lie that Hezbollah is nothing but a terrorist arm of Syria and Iran. As is evident from news reports, the organisation has become the focal point for the anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist sentiments of the Lebanese and Arab masses. Hezbollah has a mass base among Lebanon’s Shiites, for whom it provides education, health, and other social services, and has won widespread support among Sunni, Christian, and Druze

Lebanese for its resistance to the Israeli offensive.

Hezbollah is also leading the reconstruction efforts. It has promised to provide a year's rent and new furniture for every family whose home was destroyed. Hundreds of refugees in Beirut have spent the past few days queuing to register for assistance. "There is no central government presence here," Hamed Harab, a local government official, admitted. "Hezbollah is doing everything."

The situation is similar in the south. "There is no government here," Abdul Muhsen Hussein, a government official in Tyre, said. "At least [Hezbollah] are on the ground helping. If you call them at midnight, they come out to help. They are the government."

There is little prospect of Hezbollah disarming and withdrawing from south of the Litani River, as the Bush administration and the Olmert government demand. The Israeli military was unable to eliminate Hezbollah fighters during the month-long war, and no one expects that either the Lebanese army or the 15,000-strong multinational force being readied will be in a position to enforce US and Israeli dictates.

The Lebanese government has indicated that it will not order the army to disarm Hezbollah. Such a move would risk provoking a civil war throughout the country and a mutiny within the military. "The Shiite population in Lebanon is almost 50 percent," Yiftach Shapir, of the Jaffee Centre for Strategic Studies, told Israeli Arutz Sheva Radio. "In the army the proportion is even greater, particularly among the officers. Those numbers reach about 60 percent. While not all of them are extremists, the question is whether or not they would have any desire to violently confront Hezbollah."

European countries preparing to contribute troops to the UN force have insisted that they will not be responsible for taking on guerrilla fighters. "It is wrong to say that our soldiers are going to disarm Hezbollah," Italian foreign minister Massimo D'Alema said yesterday. Italy has promised to deploy 3,000 soldiers. France was expected to send about 5,000 troops to Lebanon and lead the UN operation, but President Jacques Chirac has refused to commit more than 200 French forces until clear rules of engagement with Hezbollah militants are established.

Condoleezza Rice was forced to acknowledge the European powers' concerns. "I don't think there is an expectation that this [UN] force is going to physically disarm Hezbollah," she told *USA Today*. "I think it's a little bit of a misreading about how you disarm a militia. You have to have a plan, first of all, for the disarmament of the militia, and then the hope is that some people lay down their arms voluntarily."

The setback suffered in southern Lebanon has heightened

the political crisis in Washington and Tel Aviv but it is already clear that the Bush administration intends to pursue its broader strategic plans to subjugate the Middle East. Washington was closely involved in Israel's plans for invading Lebanon, and for weeks blocked demands for a ceasefire. As journalist Seymour Hersh recently revealed in the *New Yorker*, the Bush administration welcomed the war as a preliminary step towards an attack on Iran.

In comments in the *USA Today*, Secretary of State Rice ominously pointed out that the UN resolution on Lebanon imposed an international arms embargo and thus a ban on foreign states supplying arms to Hezbollah. The provision gives the Bush administration ample pretexts for new diplomatic and military provocations against Iran and Syria.

In Israel, *Haaretz* published an op-ed piece today by Avraham Tal, titled "Preparing for the next war now". "A war that has ended in a tie and without an agreement between the sides being signed is destined to flare up again, sooner or later," Tal wrote. "In the conflict between Israel and Iran, by means of its proxy, Hezbollah, neither side achieved its strategic aim... One must start from the working assumption that the next confrontation will erupt relatively soon; for purposes of the discussion, let us assume two years from the eruption of the previous confrontation and to act in all areas as though this will happen with absolute certainty. Possibly there will be another round in the format of the second Lebanon war, but we must prepare for the possibility of something larger and more dangerous: an all-out war with regular armies, including the army of a regional power."

The current ceasefire remains uncertain and fighting could quickly erupt again. Israel still has thousands of soldiers occupying southern Lebanon and is maintaining its illegal naval blockade of the country. In these conditions, it would not be difficult for the Olmert government to resume the war by staging a provocation and declaring that Hezbollah had breached the ceasefire terms.



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