

Following Qana massacre

# Israel escalates Lebanon offensive with US backing

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Given yet another green light by the Bush administration in the wake of the Qana massacre, Israel has intensified its bombardment of Lebanon and launched a wider ground offensive in a bid to occupy a swathe of territory across the south.

In the face of an international outcry over the murder of 60 innocent people, mainly children and women, in Qana, the Israeli government has declared there will be no ceasefire until it has accomplished its mission of wiping out Hezbollah. This means the terrorisation and expulsion of the population of south Lebanon.

At a meeting last night, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's inner security cabinet authorised the expansion of the ground war, involving thousands of troops amassed on the Lebanese border. "The security cabinet approved a widening of ground operations without any objections," a government official told reporters.

Earlier, in a nationally televised address to local mayors in Israel's north, Olmert declared: "The fighting continues. There is no ceasefire and there will not be any ceasefire in the coming days." Israel still faced "no small number of days of fighting," he added, "this is a unique opportunity to change the rules in Lebanon".

Far from lessening the onslaught in the wake of the Qana bloodbath, the US and Israel are establishing a no-go zone in southern Lebanon as part of a broader strategy of bringing the country and the region under their sway. The drive to eliminate Hezbollah is nothing less than a war against the population as a whole. While Hezbollah is branded by Washington as a terrorist organisation, it has a mass base and now has the support of the overwhelming majority of ordinary Lebanese people—Christian and Sunni as well as Shiite—in its struggle against Israeli aggression.

Addressing business leaders in Miami yesterday, US President George Bush reiterated Washington's demand for a "sustainable" end to the violence in Lebanon, despite growing international pressure for an immediate ceasefire. "I assured the people here that we will work toward a plan in the United Nations Security Council that addresses the root causes of the problem," Bush told reporters.

By addressing the "root causes", the Bush administration means not only crushing the mass resistance to Israeli aggression by Hezbollah and the south Lebanese population, but moving against the governments of Syria and Iran, which are increasingly being accused by Washington and Jerusalem of supplying arms to Hezbollah.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's claims to have convinced the Israeli government to accept a 48-hour cessation of aerial bombing and a timetable for a ceasefire within a week were exposed when Olmert, who met with Rice Saturday night and again Sunday, released

a statement saying he told Rice that Israel needed another 10 to 14 days to complete its war aims.

The truth is that, behind closed doors, Rice, on behalf of the Bush administration, gave Olmert the go ahead for the escalation, and two-week extension, already planned by the Israeli military following its initial failures to end Hezbollah resistance.

"Do you think that, with the close relationship he has with Bush and Condi, he would go and say something like that without their consent?" one senior Israeli official told the *New York Times*. The official said he believed US diplomats accepted that Israel's armed forces needed more time to clear out a buffer zone in southern Lebanon before an international force could enter. Even if Rice did begin work on a UN Security Council resolution on Thursday, he noted, the resolution would likely take days to pass.

After the US spelt out its position, a UN official said a meeting scheduled for yesterday on a new international force to move into Lebanon had been delayed "until there is more political clarity" on the path ahead in the 21-day-old war.

On the ground, there has been no pause in the relentless bombardment of Lebanese villages. Journalists said local people could see no let-up. London *Times* correspondent Stephen Farrell, reporting from the Israeli border town of Metula, wrote: "I can see Israeli 155mm shells continuing to rain down on the Lebanese border town of Kila at a rate of more than one a minute, causing fires and covering the hillside opposite in a pall of drifting smoke."

At least two civilians were wounded in an Israeli air strike near the border, with the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) claiming its soldiers mistook them for fleeing Hezbollah fighters. The IDF also attacked a Lebanese military jeep near an army post in Qasmiyeh north of Tyre, killing one and wounding three with a missile from a drone aircraft. Warplanes provocatively attacked Lebanon's Masnaa border crossing with Syria for the third time in as many days, wounding four customs employees.

IDF ground forces advanced on the villages of Ayta and Ayta el-Shab, near the town of Bint Jbeil, where Israeli troops were forced to withdraw last week after days of intensive fighting. Armoured bulldozers were ploughing north of the border, flattening buildings. "By Wednesday we are going to establish a two-kilometre wide 'security zone' in which there will be no infrastructure or sign of Hezbollah's presence," army operations chief General Gadi Eisenkaut told reporters.

Journalists who entered Bint Jbeil said most buildings in the centre of town, previously home to 25,000 people, had been demolished

already. Writing in the *Times*, Nicholas Blanchford reported: “Frail men and women, stooped with age, emerge from the ruins stumbling over the rubble that carpets what used to be Bint Jbeil’s high street... the centre is completely destroyed. The high street is pitted with huge craters.”

“The Red Cross workers bearing stretchers press further into the wasteland while more lines of survivors—limping old men, young women carrying children with clothes stuffed into plastic bags—trickle out from the ruins to the awaiting ambulances. Laila Dakhllallah, wearing a chador, says that her two children have been killed. ‘I am going to stand and fight,’ she screams. ‘George Bush is a criminal. I have lost my children and I don’t care if I die. Everything dear to me has been taken away’.”

The monstrous war crime at Qana, the brazen US-Israeli response, and the complicity of the UN, have provoked outraged demonstrations in Lebanon and internationally. In Beirut, hundreds of protesters stormed the UN building, condemning the US and Britain for their support of Israel.

An estimated 5,000 held a demonstration in the Belgian capital, Brussels; thousands gathered in London’s Trafalgar Square to denounce Prime Minister Tony Blair’s support for the Israeli onslaught; and in Paris hundreds gathered at twilight to hold a minute’s silence in memory of the Qana victims.

Protests were widespread throughout the Middle East. About 1,000 protesters crowded a Cairo square, and despite being surrounded by thousands of police, chanted anti-American slogans and criticised the Arab leaders. In Jordan, more than 1,000 marched to the UN offices in Amman, shouting “Death to Israel” and “Down, down USA”. Dozens of Shiites took to the streets of Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, defying a ban on public protests in the kingdom.

Hundreds of women protested in the Syrian capital Damascus, some carrying tiny coffins symbolising the dead children. In Kuwait City, hundreds rallied outside the US embassy calling for its closure in protest at Washington’s support for Israel. In Gaza City, Palestinians stormed a UN compound before President Mahmoud Abbas ordered Presidential Guards and police to disperse the protest.

In US-occupied Iraq, protesters marched through Sadr City in Baghdad, carrying coffins labelled “United Nations” and “Arab governments”. Thousands demonstrated in Nasiriyah, 350 km south of Baghdad, chanting slogans against the Qana massacre and the ongoing Israeli attacks on Lebanon’s people and infrastructure.

The so-called 48-hour suspension of aerial activity announced by Rice was largely fabricated for international public relations purposes.

Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, quoted a senior government source saying the air force had been told to continue attacking “targets that present a threat to Israel and its troops, including rocket launchers, vehicles transporting ammunition, Hezbollah fighters, weapons stores and Hezbollah assets”. The term “Hezbollah assets” included people identified with Hezbollah but who posed no immediate threat—in other words, anyone still living in south Lebanon, the Bekaa Valley and southern Beirut.

The temporary lull offered by Israel for civilians to escape the bombing in south Lebanon is aimed at accomplishing the goal of driving the remaining population from the area. Journalists said villagers flying white flags from cars, buses and pick-up trucks were fleeing in terror. At the same time, aid organisations warned that many people lacked the vehicles and resources to leave, and the UN emergency relief coordinator Jan Egeland protested that Israeli authorities had refused to provide any details of the “so-called

humanitarian truce”.

One Israeli minister admitted that the claims of suspending aerial attacks were oriented to appeasing international anger, in order to step up the aggression. Justice Minister Haim Ramon, a close ally of Olmert, told IDF radio: “The suspension of our aerial activities does not signify in any way the end to the war. On the contrary, this decision will allow us to win this war and lessen international pressure.”

Israeli Defence Minister Amir Peretz gave voice to the wider war drive of Israel and the US, dismissing calls for an immediate ceasefire. “This war will change the face of the region,” he said. “We are battling Hezbollah, which is nothing but the vanguard of the extremist regime in Tehran that finances and encourages its murderous activities.” Iran has denied Israeli charges that it has armed and trained Hezbollah fighters, saying that it only provides the group with moral support.

Washington’s support for Israel’s ongoing atrocities was made clear at the UN Security Council meeting in New York, where the US blocked any condemnation of Israel over the Qana bombing. The 15-nation council met in emergency session at the request of UN secretary-general Kofi Annan and Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora, to consider a statement, proposed by Qatar calling the attack “deliberate” and demanding a ceasefire.

But the US insisted that the statement be altered, in line with its position, that it “strongly deplores this loss of innocent lives and the killing of all civilians in the present conflict” and “underscores the urgency of securing a lasting, permanent and sustainable cease-fire”. The final statement was agreed after the US announced that Israel had suspended its air attacks for 48 hours pending an investigation into the Qana bombing.

By contrast, later in the day the UN Security Council passed by 14 votes to 1 a US-backed resolution threatening sanctions against Iran after August 31 if it does not halt uranium enrichment and open its nuclear program to international inspections. While the wording of the resolution, negotiated by the five permanent Council members—the US, UK, China, France and Russia—as well as Germany, did not impose immediate sanctions, John Bolton, the US ambassador to the UN, welcomed the outcome.

Bolton accused Iran, like Iraq before it, of “consistently defying the international community”. Iran has denied planning to enrich uranium for any other purpose than power generation. Washington’s accusations have been brought forward as one means of providing a casus belli for an attack on Iran. Bolton’s satisfaction with the resolution reflected the fact that China and Russia, as well as the European powers, had fallen into line with the aggressive stance against Iran.

The two resolutions conform with Washington’s overall strategy: to completely refashion the Middle East by brute force to remove all obstacles to its hegemony over the oil and gas-rich region.



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