

Israeli cluster bombs blanket Lebanese towns

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Unexploded Israeli cluster munitions dropped during the 34-day war in Lebanon have killed at least 13 civilians and wounded 50 since the ceasefire took effect on August 14. About 100,000 unexploded cluster bomblets litter the country, preventing large numbers of people from returning to their homes. Israel's bombardment of urban and residential areas with cluster munitions was a deliberate tactic by the government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to terrorise the Lebanese people and prevent refugees from returning to their homes.

UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Jan Egeland reported on Wednesday that 359 separate cluster bomb strike locations have been found after demining teams surveyed almost 90 percent of affected Lebanese territory. Unexploded munitions cover entire towns, villages, and farmlands, particularly those in southern Lebanon. "It is an outrage that we have 100,000 unexploded bombs among where children, women, and civilians, and shopkeepers and farmers are now going to tread," he declared. "I hear that there are people wounded every day, and people killed, if not every day then every other day.... Cluster bombs have affected large areas—lots of homes, lots of farmland, lots of commercial businesses and shops—and they will be with us for many, many months, possibly for years."

Investigators in Lebanon have reported that the vast majority of the unexploded cluster bomblets were dropped in the last three days of the war. "What's shocking and completely immoral is that 90 percent of the cluster bomb strikes occurred in the last 72 hours of the conflict, when we knew there would be a resolution and an end of this," Egeland declared.

The timing of the cluster bombardment underscores the criminality of Israel's offensive in Lebanon, and exposes the Olmert government's lie that it avoided using cluster munitions in populated areas.

The Olmert government, in collaboration with the

Bush administration, invaded Lebanon on July 13 in order to destroy Hezbollah and to reduce the country to a subordinated US-Israeli client state. As the war progressed, however, it became clear that the US and Israel were not achieving their objectives and that a major political and military setback loomed.

Just hours before the UN vote on a ceasefire on August 11, Israel poured thousands of troops over the Lebanese border and launched a sustained artillery and missile assault in a desperate attempt to improve its position ahead of the ceasefire's implementation. The Olmert government hoped that a final three-day assault would at least ensure that southern Lebanon would remain a depopulated "buffer zone", patrolled by Israeli forces.

According to the UN, 250,000 Lebanese civilians have been unable to return to their homes, either because they were destroyed or because of the danger of unexploded ordinance. In Beirut alone, it is estimated that 35,000 people remain homeless. Tens of thousands of refugees are in other urban centres and in neighbouring Syria. That the number of displaced people is not far higher is due only to the Lebanese people's determination not to be made into permanent refugees and, like the Palestinians, lose their land to Israeli annexation.

Israel made every effort to render southern Lebanon uninhabitable. "This is the worst [cluster bomb contamination] I have ever seen," Marc Garlasco, of Human Rights Watch, told the *Christian Science Monitor*. "We're on the verge of a potential humanitarian crisis if the deminers can't get a handle on this." Garlasco previously worked as a senior Pentagon analyst and was responsible for recommending Iraqi targets for bombing in the 2003 invasion. He described the US cluster bombing of Iraq as "child's play" compared to the situation in Lebanon.

A Reuters report described the situation in one

southern Lebanese village, Yohmor: “When a team from Mines Advisory Group first visited on the day after the August 14 ceasefire, they found bomblets littering the ground from one end of the village to the other. They were on the roofs of all the houses, in all the gardens and across all the roads and paths. Some were inside houses, after landing through the widows or through holes blasted in the roof by artillery and aircraft. A lot of people returned right after the ceasefire, but many of them quickly left again when they found their homes reduced to rubble and covered in explosives.”

Children have been among those killed and maimed by the bombs. Most unexploded cluster munitions are round and about the size of a tennis ball. Curious children kicking or picking up the munitions have suffered terrible wounds, including amputated limbs.

On August 26, the *Washington Post* reported the details of one case. Following the ceasefire, 10-year-old Hassan Tehini returned with his family to their home in the southern Lebanese town of Aita al-Shaab, and on August 17 he and his cousins explored the remains of their town. “We wanted to see which houses were destroyed,” he said. “The whole neighbourhood is broken.” When a cousin found what he thought was a ball and threw it in the air, the bomblet exploded in mid-air, causing Hassan’s intestines to spill out. “I started screaming,” he told the *Post*. “The bomb threw me two or three metres away. My legs, my clothes were soaked in blood.”

Human rights organisations and legal experts have condemned Israel for gross violations of international law. “Cluster munitions, by their nature, can never discriminate between civilian and military targets if used in residential areas,” the UK-based human rights legal organisation, Public Interest Lawyers, explained in a letter to the *Guardian*. “International humanitarian law absolutely prohibits weapons systems that cannot discriminate between civilian and military objectives.... If Israeli forces have used cluster bombs in residential areas then they may be guilty of committing war crimes, just as those who used cluster bombs in Baghdad and Basra.”

The US State Department last week announced that it was investigating whether Israeli use of US-supplied cluster bombs in residential areas breached agreements to only use the weapons against open military targets.

In 1982, Washington suspended sales of cluster munitions to Israel for six years after the Zionist state’s invasion of Lebanon provoked a congressional enquiry.

The State Department review is nothing more than a sop to international outrage. The Bush administration directly collaborated in Israel’s invasion as a means of extending US domination of the Middle East and of placing further pressure on Syria and Iran. Hoping to see the emergence of what Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called a “new Middle East”, Washington encouraged Israel to step up its destruction and for weeks blocked demands for an immediate ceasefire. No less than the Olmert government and Israeli Defence Forces command, leading officials in the Bush administration should face war crimes charges for their actions in Lebanon.



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