

Kofi Annan visit provokes angry protests in Beirut

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Kofi Annan's ongoing visit to the Middle East has thus far been a humiliating one. It not only served to confirm how discredited the United Nations has become in the eyes of the Arab masses as a result of its readiness to abide by the dictates of the United States, but also its continued impotence when it comes to even the most minimal efforts to rein in Israel.

During a visit to Beirut's devastated southern suburbs in the Haret Hreik area with Siniora, Annan was booed by a crowd chanting pro-Hezbollah slogans "Death to Israel" and "Long live Syria." A group of women denounced the UN for its collusion with Israel. One laid a portrait of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah down on the windscreen of one of the moving vehicles. One resident told the press, "To hell with the United Nations and Annan. Let him look at what the UN and the United States have done and at all this destruction. This is their work."

Annan was forced to leave after only 10 minutes.

Later as he visited four UN border posts, where he was met by residents with handwritten signs reading, "Americans and Israelis are the terrorists."

Timur Goksel, the former senior adviser and spokesman for Unifil, told the *Guardian* that the UN was now more unpopular in the region than at any point in its history. "The UN guys are uncomfortable with the mood; they know there is lot of anger toward the UN," said Goksel.

In Beirut neighbourhoods anti-UN graffiti adorns the walls. Stickers reading "Unjust" have begun to appear on car windows.

Annan's trip to Jerusalem on August 30 was epitomised by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert scornful rejection of the UN secretary general's request for even a partial lifting of the seven-week-long blockade of Lebanon.

While in Lebanon on August 29, Annan had said the sea, land and air embargo "for the Lebanese is a humiliation, and infringement on their sovereignty." He

warned that there was a great risk of the fighting being resumed if the agreement was not enforced in full.

After talks with the Lebanese government and Hezbollah before his arrival in Israel, Annan said that UN Resolution 1701 to end the month-long conflict was "a fixed menu, it's not a buffet, it's not a smorgasbord, it's not an a la carte menu where you choose and pick. We are entering the stage of recovery and reconstruction, we have a chance to have a long-term ceasefire."

He took great pains to reassure Israel that its security concerns were the UN's primary consideration, promising that the UN military force, Unifil, was to be significantly strengthened in the coming weeks. The Lebanese government was, he said, committed to the task of curbing Hezbollah—"the idea that you cannot have a state within a state, but have to have one authority, one law and one gun."

Speaking in the Unifil office in Naqura, near the Israeli border, Annan said that "The Lebanese have shown they are serious about the implementation of 1701 in all the deployments and efforts they have made."

Later, Annan gave a daily report from Unifil to Israeli Defence Minister Amir Peretz, showing that whereas Hezbollah had violated the ceasefire four times, Israel had done so nearly 70 times. UN monitors cite Israel for violations, including overflights, resupplying forces and attacks on Hezbollah positions. Under these circumstances, "Hezbollah is showing incredible discipline," Annan commented. He later told reporters that while he would prefer that Israel lift its air, sea and land blockade, at this point he would only ask Israel to allow Beirut's airport to resume normal operations.

Olmert would not even give him that much.

In the morning of August 30, he met Annan for some 90 minutes at the prime minister's Jerusalem residence, of which only 20 minutes were in private.

Annan's appeals for restraint cut no ice. Instead, at a

joint news conference, Olmert turned Annan's words against him. The ceasefire was, he said, "not a smorgasbord. It's not a buffet. It's a one-time meal." Therefore Israel could not lift the blockade on one part of Lebanon while not on others.

He also rejected Annan's request that Israel withdraw its troops completely from southern Lebanon once the UN force there reaches around 5,000 troops, rather than its full planned strength of 15,000. "Israel will pull out of Lebanon once the resolution is implemented," he said.

It could take months before a UN force of 15,000 is gathered together, if indeed this is ever accomplished. So far, approximately 2,500 UN troops are based in the country, 2,000 of which are observers who were already there before the conflict started, and pledges from Europe and elsewhere so far fall far short of 15,000.

Olmert also argued that UN peacekeepers should be stationed along the Syria-Lebanon border, as opposed to Lebanese forces as stated by the UN and European powers.

Seizing on comments by Annan while meeting with the relatives of reservists Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser, Olmert added that the most important aspect of implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1701 "is the unconditional release of the abducted Israeli soldiers."

His office later issued a statement saying, "The prime minister emphasised that the main part of implementing the decision was the return of the abducted soldiers to their homes and said that Resolution 1701 would not be implemented in full without the soldiers' release and return home."

In reality, the unconditional release of the two soldiers is not included in the 19 "action points" set out in the August 11 UN resolution. To make this a precondition for an Israeli withdrawal provides for Israeli Defence Forces troops to continue operating in Lebanon indefinitely.

After making these demands, Olmert concluded with a cynical expression of hope that "conditions" would soon emerge for an agreement with Lebanon for the first time since 1958 and that the ceasefire would become "a cornerstone to build a new reality between Israel and Lebanon."

Clearly angered, Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora responded that "Lebanon will be the last Arab country that could sign a peace agreement with Israel."

Mohammed Fneish, one of two Hezbollah representatives in the Lebanese cabinet, said, "There will be no unconditional release.... There should be an exchange through indirect negotiations. This is the

principle to which Hezbollah and the resistance are adhering."

After leaving Jerusalem, Annan travelled to Ramallah in the West Bank for talks with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Noting that Israel's attack on Lebanon had overshadowed its ongoing assault against the Palestinians, Annan told the press, "Over 200 Palestinians have been killed since the end of June. This must stop immediately."

He called on Israel to re-open cargo and pedestrian crossing points in Gaza, stating, "I have made my feelings known in talks with Israeli officials. Beyond preserving life, we have to sustain life, the closure of Gaza must be lifted, the crossing points must be opened, not just to allow goods but to allow Palestinian exports out as well."

The lack of weight Annan's urgings carry in Israel was underlined by the killing of eight Palestinians in air strikes and gun battles in Gaza City on the day of his visit, including a 14-year-old boy.

His readiness to kow-tow before the Olmert government was only underlined by the rebuke made the next day by UN Humanitarian Affairs chief Jan Egeland over Israel's "completely immoral" use of cluster bombs in Lebanon. Egeland noted that civilians were facing "massive problems" returning home because as many as 100,000 unexploded cluster bombs remain, of which 90 percent were dropped "in the last 72 hours of the conflict, when we knew there would be a resolution."

A spokesman for Unicef said 12 people had been killed by cluster bombs in southern Lebanon since the war ended. Such uncomfortable facts were not aired by Annan in discussions described by Olmert as "friendly" and "warm."



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