

Lebanese military resumes shelling of Palestinian camp

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At least nineteen people were killed yesterday in a renewed military offensive by the Lebanese army targeting the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp outside of Tripoli. Around 50 Lebanese tanks and armoured carriers are involved in the operation, with the ostensible aim of routing the Fatah al-Islam jihadist group. The conflict has so far claimed more than one hundred lives, including at least 20 civilians.

Palestinian sources said the army was making ready for a “final push” into the camp that would result in far more casualties than those suffered as a result of the bombardment, which has already destroyed most of the camp’s infrastructure. An estimated 25,000 to 30,000 residents have fled the camp, leaving upward of 10,000 trapped inside.

The bloody assault on a defenceless civilian population has the full support of the United States government. Within days of the launching of the military operation last month, Washington began dispatching massive quantities of munitions to the Lebanese Army.

Over the past year, the US has already provided \$45 million in military aid to the government of Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. But last month Congress approved an additional \$280 million, a huge figure that would provide Lebanon with around \$1 billion in weaponry to deal with every known member of the tiny Fatah al-Islam group.

In just one day last week, at least eight planeloads of US armaments arrived at Beirut’s international airport. According to Lebanese security sources, more than nine additional planeloads of US military aid have arrived in the past few days.

The BBC noted that Saudi Arabia, a Sunni regime hostile to Syria and Iran, is also pumping money into Lebanon, totalling over \$1 billion. The sheikdom has

been repeatedly accused of sponsoring the creation of Fatah al-Islam with the support of the US, as a counterweight to the Shiite Hezbollah.

The savagery of the assault and the diplomatic manoeuvres surrounding it indicate that the attack was prepared well in advance, in collusion with Washington, and with the ultimate aim of justifying a new round of attacks on the Shiite Hezbollah movement in Lebanon and new provocations against Syria.

The Bush administration is intent on reversing the political defeat it suffered last summer when its ally Israel failed to crush Hezbollah in the course of a weeks-long air bombardment of much of Lebanon combined with a ground incursion into Hezbollah strongholds in the south of the country. Whipping up sectarian tensions is a means to this end.

Lebanese Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh, who is often at odds with Prime Minister Siniora, warned that the US arms shipments are aimed at throwing the country and the region into chaos. The shipments have also prompted warnings by Russia that the US is destabilising Lebanon.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said at a news conference after a meeting in Germany of the Middle East “Quartet” (the US, Russia, the European Union and the UN): “We also know that it is necessary to prevent the shipment of arms that might serve to destabilize the situation. Those who send arms know very well which actions could be destabilizing or not.”

Accompanying the military build-up of Lebanon’s armed forces are moves to position some of the 10,000-strong United Nations force UNFIL directly on the Syrian border. The UN’s Lebanon Independent Border Assessment Team has started an evaluation of border-monitoring capacities along the Lebanese-

Syrian border, which is due to be completed in two weeks and will report back to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

The siege of the Palestinian camp coincides with the May 30 decision by the United Nations Security Council to set up an inquiry into the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Hariri and 22 others were killed by a truck bomb in Beirut on February 14, 2005, and Damascus was immediately blamed by Lebanon's anti-Syrian parties and by the US. The anti-Syrian campaign led to the departure of Syrian military forces from Lebanon after 29 years and the installation in Beirut of a right-wing, pro-Western government of Sunni, Christian and Druze parties, headed by Siniora.

The Lebanese government has consistently asserted Syrian involvement in the murder of Hariri, but the investigation it conducted was so seriously flawed that the UN convened its own. This investigation has also made claims of Syrian involvement.

The UN resolution setting up an international tribunal on Hariri's assassination was passed under Chapter Seven of the UN charter, which relates to threats to international peace and allows for the use of military force. It is all the more extraordinary given that its chief architect—the Bush administration—does not recognise the authority of international tribunals to prosecute American citizens.

The resolution was pushed through by the United States, Britain and France—the former colonial power in Lebanon—with the backing of seven other Security Council members. Five members abstained—including permanent members Russia and China, as well as South Africa, Indonesia and Qatar.

The only concession to the opposition of Russia and China was to delay implementing the resolution until June 10, ostensibly to give the Lebanese parliament time to agree on its own internal inquiry. If the Lebanese parliament fails to do so, the Security Council resolution will automatically take effect.

This is a hollow gesture, given that the parliament has been deadlocked for months by conflict between the Siniora government and the Shia-based parties Hezbollah and Amal. Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri of Amal has refused to convene a session to ratify the creation of a tribunal because he rejects the legitimacy of the Siniora government. He has stated that the basis

for resolving the dispute over a Lebanese tribunal is the creation of a national unity cabinet that allows veto powers to the opposition parties.

Syria also denounced the resolution and the invocation of Chapter Seven. An unnamed official said, "The formation of the international court under Chapter Seven is considered a degradation of Lebanon's sovereignty ..." Syrian President Bashar Assad has said he will not hand over any Syrian citizens to a UN tribunal.



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