

Humanitarian disaster looms as Lebanese attack on Palestinian camp continues

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The Lebanese military siege of the Palestinian refugee camp at Nahr al-Bared in the north continues, even as fighting spreads to the Ain Al-Helweh Palestinian refugee camp in Saida in the south.

The siege—first mounted on May 20 for the stated aim of destroying the Sunni jihadist group Fatah al-Islam—has produced a major humanitarian crisis. More than 27,000 Palestinians have been displaced, 20,000 of whom have sought shelter in the neighbouring camp at Beddawi, just 10 kilometres away. Eight to ten thousand residents remain trapped in Nahr al-Bared, which has had much of its infrastructure destroyed.

No aid can be delivered to those trapped inside. Only thirty residents have been evacuated by the Palestine Red Crescent in recent days—women, children, the old and the injured. The United Nations Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) has said it is concerned that large areas of the camp, including its own compound, could be booby-trapped or littered with unexploded bombs and shells.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has provided five tonnes of food aid, 150 hygiene kits and 500 blankets to 250 displaced families in Sidon. But Richard Cook of UNRWA described the situation at Beddawi as “unsustainable.” UNRWA has launched a global appeal for \$12.7 million to provide food aid, shelter, emergency health care, water and sanitation and security for the next three months.

Over 100 people have been killed in the fighting, including 20 refugees inside Nahr al-Bared and one Lebanese civilian caught in the crossfire. The full tally of casualties is unknown because no one has access to the camp.

Samih Kabara, the ICRC’s spokesman, said Sunday, “We have been on standby since the early hours of the morning with our... ambulances to try to evacuate the

wounded, but the shelling is so intense and we could not enter.”

Bilal Aslan, the head of the secular nationalist Fatah faction in Nahr al-Bared, stated that the residents of Nahr al-Bared who remained were sheltering in basements of buildings or in the entrances of old bomb shelters. “There’s no food, no water, no electricity. We can’t hold out much longer like this,” he said. Medical facilities were almost nonexistent and it was too dangerous to go out onto the streets, he added.

Amnesty International has expressed its concern over the death of civilians and “the army’s use of artillery and other heavy weapons, including tank fire, against heavily-populated areas.”

The Lebanese bombardment has been stepped up since June 1 and it is widely expected that the army will move into the camp soon to finish off the estimated 200 to 250 Fatah al-Islam combatants still alive there. This would place the lives of thousands at risk.

Around fifty tanks and armoured cars have surrounded the camp since June 1. The let-up in bombing yesterday saw an additional two dozen armoured personnel carriers arrive, as well as many more troops. A helicopter gunship has also been deployed to block an escape route to the Mediterranean Sea.

The *Observer* June 3 reported a special forces officer stating: “This is it. We tried to negotiate, but it didn’t work. The army will continue until they are all dead. There is no stopping.”

Chillingly, a Lebanese army commander at the scene added that anyone who had not left during the ceasefire was “unlikely” to be considered a non-combatant: “We risked our lives for 10 days to allow all the civilians to escape. If someone did not take the decision to leave, then they took the decision to stay, which means they

are not a civilian.”

This flies in the face of statements by Lebanese government officials accusing Fatah al-Islam of using civilians as human shields and having fired on people who were attempting to flee the camp.

Lebanese security officials were reported stating that Nahr al-Bared had been strategically divided into three zones—one controlled by the army, one by Fatah al-Islam and one by Palestinian civilians and PLO guerrillas who were refusing the Islamists entry.

The response of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas’s Fatah and the PLO to the assault has been extraordinary. Fatah has registered its support for the attack as a defence of Lebanese sovereignty, defended the tactics employed by the army, and launched its own offensive against an Al Qaeda-style group similar to Fatah al-Islam.

Sultan Abu al-Aynayn, secretary general of Fatah and head of the PLO in Lebanon, said, “While it is true that we might disagree on the means, a positive sign lies in the fact that various Palestinian and Lebanese groups agree that Fatah al-Islam should be readily crushed.”

He denied that civilians at the camp have been targeted by the Lebanese army, describing such claims as “rumours that the militants have been spreading to make the army look bad.” He continued: “In reality, right from the beginning of the fight the civilians suffered very few injuries. Only four civilians were injured and most of these injuries were of minor nature.”

He urged all Fatah al-Islam members still alive to surrender, adding, “I trust the army.”

The violence that erupted on Sunday at the Ain al-Helweh camp was instigated by the Islamist group Jund al-Sham, a Syrian Sunni group hostile to Syria’s government, when it attacked an army checkpoint. A second attack followed yesterday.

There were reports that PLO fighters openly clashed with Jund Al Sham members, with al-Aynayn telling reporters “our fighters are trying to back the Lebanese army to foil any movement by Jund al-Sham, which has close links with an Al Qaeda-inspired Fatah al-Islam movement in the area.”

Earlier, on June 1, a gun-battle broke out between Jund al-Sham and Fatah fighters. According to local media sources, upwards of 500 Palestinians have already fled Ain al-Helweh.

Fatah al-Islam has said that it will spread its fight to Ain al-Helweh and other refugee camps. This would not only threaten more bloodshed, but raise the possibility of Lebanese military attacks on more Palestinian camps and the entry of the Lebanese army into the camps.

Despite the lack of support among Palestinians for the jihadist groups, many Palestinians are furious at the destruction of Nahr al-Bared. An invasion of the camp, in breach of a 39-year-old agreement excluding Lebanese forces, would provoke further conflict.

Hajj Rif’at, media director for Fatah in Lebanon, has stated, “If the army invades [Nahr al-Bared], I think that there will be many more Palestinian victims from within the camp, and we refuse that the solution be at the expense of our children and women and the destruction of our camp.”

Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia movement, has denounced the shelling of Nahr al-Bared and described its borders as a “red line.”

For its part, Hamas, like Fatah, has given tacit support to the Lebanese military operation. Spokesman Ali Baraka stated that the “tangible progress” made by the army in clearing Nahr al-Bared’s northern and eastern edges of militants could become a “victory that could open the way for a political settlement.”



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