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Lebanon/Israel missions update - 1

Lebanon mission update 1

In village after village, we saw a similar story: evidence of families leaving quickly, abandoning food and laundry as though they didn't expect to be away for long. The bodies of people killed in their homes in several villages are still under the rubble. In some villages the stench of rotting corpses is unbearable. Roaming dogs often offer an indication of where the bodies are buried.

South Lebanon , 31 July-1 August

Several corpses were removed during the 48-hour air strike suspension announced by the Israeli authorities. In some areas the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Lebanese Red Cross could not reach places where the bodies lay, because there were no guarantees from the Israeli military that they would be safe.

Bint Jbail

It was left to journalists to pull bodies from the rubble and carry them on doors to ambulances waiting in less exposed areas. Three journalists in Bin Jbail told us how they had carried bodies, and had also found a distressed woman digging with her bare hand and pleading with them to help her find her sister under the rubble of a demolished house - she had not been able to approach the house before because of the continuous Israeli fire in the area. They helped her and eventually found two elderly women, one of them disabled and bed-ridden, and an elderly man alive under the rubble. The disabled woman had been soiling herself after days in her bed and her brother had had to tie her hands because she was biting them and ripping her skin.

Srifa

In Srifa, where during the night of 18-19 July some 15 people were killed in their homes, we saw a head sticking out of the rubble of a demolished house; the body was entirely trapped under heavy rubble which could not be moved without heavy machinery which is not available in the village. Several other bodies remain but cannot be reached at all.

In several villages, we gathered many stories about the impact of this conflict on people's daily lives:

Supermarkets have been destroyed seemingly as part of the drive to force out remaining villagers who had remained in spite of having been cut off from outside supplies.

Electricity lines were destroyed in the first attacks, so people were cut off from the outside world as they could not recharge their mobile phones. The few places with landlines - hospitals, some municipal buildings - found them cut early on.

All along the way to south Lebanon, petrol stations were shelled from the first few days and as trucks have been the target of air strikes from the outset, it has become impossible for fuel supplies to reach petrol stations in villages. The lack of fuel is an acute problem, making it difficult and in many cases impossible for villagers to leave, and for those wishing to remain to get outside supplies. Any remaining petrol supplies are very expensive.

People are afraid to travel on the roads, and not just in the South. Even just outside Beirut, those who do get on the road are terrified of being anywhere near trucks, even small trucks, as these have been particularly targeted. Drivers take additional risks to overtake and get away from trucks as fast as they can - even open trucks carrying fruit and vegetables - as they are seen as likely targets.

The massive and rapid displacement of people from their villages in the south and the difficult or impossible communication links between those in the southern villages and the outside world have made it difficult to help the internally displaced people, or even to know who has gone where and when.

Hospitals and other centres are completely overwhelmed. Relatives of southern villagers who are elsewhere in the country are panicked. They told us that they have no means of getting news of their relatives in the South, and have not been able to go there due to the danger of road travel.

Without telephone or TV, news had travelled mainly through journalists, humanitarian workers and others who have been moving between villages, but families in more isolated houses have been completely cut off, terrified to stay, and terrified to leave.

Israel Mission update 1

Arriving in Tel Aviv

The mission arrived in Tel Aviv and headed straight up to north to Haifa. The day we left had one of the highest civilian death tolls in Israel since the conflict began three weeks ago so we were expecting the situation to be tense.

Haifa

From Haifa, the first stop on our agenda was visiting the city of Carmiel. Driving through Haifa on our way to Carmiel we could see several buildings that had been damaged in recent rocket attacks. Usually on a Friday morning both Carmiel and Haifa would be bustling with people doing their shopping for the Sabbath. But we were all very surprised at how quiet they were, Carmiel in particular was virtually empty of people on the streets.

Carmiel

We met up with people from the Carmiel municipality who took us to see several houses that had been hit by Hizbullah rockets. In the first house we visited, a rocket had come through the roof of one apartment and went through the floor to the apartment below. Luckily no one was home at the time on the top floor and no one was seriously injured below. Both apartments are currently uninhabitable.

The municipality estimates that 30% of the population have left the city. The way they have been trying to measure the number of people who were still there and who have left is by counting the number of trash bins that are empty and those that are full. The municipality, as other municipalities throughout the

country, are working to provide basic services to those residents who are spending most of their times in shelters or afraid to leave their homes. When we pulled up to the building there were over a dozen volunteers packing up meals to deliver to people who were still in the city. They estimated they provided food to about 2,500 people per day.

Acre

From Carmiel we moved on to Acre, where again we met with people from the municipality. Acre is a mixed city with a large Israeli Arab population (Palestinian citizens of Israel). Acre was even more deserted than Carmiel, because the day before five people had died when they left their shelter prematurely.

We were told that two of the people who died were killed by small steel balls that have been packed into the rocket's warhead. In addition to killing and injuring many civilians, everywhere we saw places where rockets had hit we saw evidence of these still balls, with walls, windows, and even steel fences damaged and often with the steel balls still embedded.

Most of the sites where rockets have hit have been cleaned up and repaired, but we were able to visit a kindergarten that had been hit, although again luckily no children were there at the time. The soundtrack for the day was the sound of air raid sirens and rockets.

Over 10 times during the day we had to seek shelter when the air raid sirens went off, including three times while driving where the only thing we could do was pull over quickly and do the best we could to lay low.

Across from the kindergarten we met an 85 -year-old woman who spent most of her time sitting right outside the shelter because she was blind and unable to make it up and downstairs every time the sirens went off.

We did hear reports that in many Arab neighborhoods the air raids sirens either aren't working or aren't present.

For us, it was just one day, but many Israelis have been living like this for weeks.

The missions' diaries can be found on:

<http://amnestybanonisrael.blogspot.com/>

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