

Death Toll in Lebanon Could Be Twice the Official Figure

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BEIRUT, Jul 28 (IPS) - Lebanese doctors, aid workers and refugees are all reporting that the official number of dead in Lebanon is far lower than the actual.

"I think that the real number is at least 750 dead so far," Dr. Bachir el-Sham at the Complex Hospital in Sidon city told IPS in a telephone interview. Sidon is 43 km south of Beirut, and just north of Tyre. This region has seen the worst of the Israeli bombing.

Sham said that by coordinating casualty figures with other hospitals and clinics in the south, he believes that an average of 40 civilians are being killed by Israeli air strikes each day.

"One day we had 100 dead. The authorities in Beirut can only estimate — we never have official statistics about anything in Lebanon," he said. "Regarding the number of dead, we can say for sure that by the numbers we're seeing down here, it is at least 750, if not more."

One reason the real number will be higher is that "so many people are buried in the rubble," he said.

As in Dahaya district of southern Beirut, both Sidon and Tyre have had large numbers of civilian apartment buildings bombed to the ground, many with entire families in them.

"When you have a building demolished, how many people are under the rubble? Who can say? But we know there are many."

Bilal Masri, assistant director at the large Beirut Government University Hospital in Beirut, also told IPS that the official number was far too low.

"We have had several reports from the south that there are many bodies buried under buildings, or left in cars that were hit by Israeli rockets," he said.

Ghadeer Shayto, a 15-year-old girl being treated at the Beirut hospital for wounds she suffered during an Israeli rocket attack while fleeing her village Kafra near Bint Jbail, said she had seen many dead on her way to Beirut.

"On our way out we passed so many civilian cars which had burnt bodies in them," she said, weeping. "They were burnt, and left there because nobody could come to take the bodies away." Bint Jbail is the southern town that has seen the most intense fighting between Israeli troops and Hezbollah fighters.

She said the bus in which they were leaving had hoisted white flags, but it was hit by a rocket. "My brother and cousin were killed, and the rest of us are wounded."

Abdel Hamid al-Ashi, father of two, saw similar sights as he fled Bint Jbail.

"I had to walk 10 kilometres to a small village to find a taxi, and along the road I saw many bodies rotting in the sun," he told IPS. "There were also cars which had been rocketed which were full of bodies."

Many patients and refugees reported seeing bodies along the way when they fled. Under continuing air strikes, no aid teams have been able to rescue anyone or retrieve the bodies.

In Dahaya district of Beirut about a fifth of all buildings have been totally demolished. There was a strong smell of rotting corpses at many of those sites that this correspondent visited.

Volunteer workers are also reporting that the officially declared toll is too low.

"Several of our relief workers who tried to help in Dahaya have reported to us that many families are buried under the rubble there," Wafaa el-Yassir, a representative of Norwegian People's Aid-Lebanon told IPS at her office. "And we have similar reports from Tyre and Sidon."

"The number of dead is as much as 800 by now," she added. "And probably even more, but it will take some time to find all of the bodies."

Ahmad Halimeh, with the non-governmental organisation Popular Aid for Relief and Development who is now working primarily to aid war victims in Beirut and southern Lebanon, said that "in my experience you can always at least double the initial figure, and we are seeing the same thing happen again now. So the number is at least 800, and will be more over time as we continue to gain access to these areas that have been destroyed."

There is little doubt that the real death toll is far higher than the official one. The question remains, by how much?

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