

Lebanese Tremors Rock Syria

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DAMASCUS, Jul 13 (IPS) - Syrians are outraged over Israeli air strikes in Lebanon that have killed 53 civilians and closed down Beirut's international airport.*

Early Thursday morning Israeli air strikes targeted the new Rafiq al-Hariri international airport. Israeli naval vessels entered Lebanon's territorial waters and blocked access to ports while its forces launched an offensive in southern Lebanon against Hezbollah fighters.

Hezbollah is a militant group that has long engaged in armed conflict with Israel. It is believed to be strongest in the south of Lebanon, in the areas bordering Israel.

The Israeli offensive was launched in response to the killing of eight Israeli soldiers in clashes with Hezbollah fighters Wednesday near the border 15km from the Mediterranean. Two Israeli soldiers were taken hostage. An Israeli soldier had earlier been captured in Gaza.

In an escalation of the conflict, an Israeli woman was killed after Hezbollah fighters fired rockets across the border into the Israeli town Nahariya. An Israeli air base was hit by rockets, along with other towns in the area. Several Israeli civilians have been wounded.

The Israeli military entered Lebanon for the first time since withdrawing six years ago.

"I doubt you will find one Syrian who will not denounce what Israel is doing in Gaza, the West Bank and now in Lebanon," independent publicity consultant Ibrahim Yakhour told IPS. "Syrians believe that what the Palestinians suffer is what the Syrians suffer."

Yakhour, a 60-year-old retired journalist said political parties in Syria have been calling for a peaceful political process in the Middle East for the past 30 years. "But when people are humiliated, attacked and killed, radical reactions commence which are deleterious to the political process."

People in Damascus also fear that a regional war may spread to Syria. "The entire region is now involved," said Emad Huria, a 45-year-old literary critic. "All Arabs should raise their voices against the Israeli invasion of Lebanon."

Maher Skandyran, a 37-year-old worker at a watch store in downtown Damascus said Israeli double standards are making people furious.

"I feel angry. Ninety-five percent of the Palestinian prisoners held by Israel are innocent civilians, including women and children. Nobody says a word about this. But when three Israeli armed soldiers are detained, this is such a big crime, and everyone is outraged. Is this justice?"

Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah said the Israeli soldiers had been seized to push Israel to release prisoners.

Israel reacted with unexpected aggression. An Israeli military spokesman told reporters, "Since this morning Israeli naval vessels have enforced a full naval closure on Lebanon, because Lebanon's ports are used to transfer both terrorists and weapons to the terror organisations operating in Lebanon."

Another official said that the attacks had been launched to pressure the Lebanese government to deal with Hezbollah.

Hezbollah's al-Manar television station in Beirut was bombed. Israel also bombed several bridges that link southern Lebanon with the rest of the country.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said the action was in response to "an act of war by the state of Lebanon." His cabinet promised a response with "appropriate severity."

But the root of the Lebanese problem could lie in the occupation of Palestinian areas.

"Everything which is happening illustrates the main problem, which is the Israelis invading and occupying Palestine and taking the land," 55-year-old local merchant Faez Ashoor told IPS. "When that situation ends, we will have peace.."

Some of the Syrian anger is directed inevitably at the United States.

"I feel upset because our neighbours like Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine are being attacked," said Hamad al-Khatib, 26-year-old owner of a mobile phone store in central Damascus. "Israel doesn't care about international law. We thought America was peaceful, but we see them support Israel, which is killing women and children. What are we to think of America now?"

Syrians are also now worried about themselves, he said. "This Israeli attack makes all of us feel insecure now. We are all very anxious."

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