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Lebanon/Israel missions update - 2

Lebanon mission update 2

The last two nights have seen some of the heaviest bombardment of Beirut. More civilian infrastructure has been destroyed. Today we visited Baalbak in the Beqaa valley.

Beqaa Valley, 5th August

We drove up to the Beqaa Valley town of Baalbak today, about 150 km east of Beirut and famous for its ruins of Roman temples. At about 10 am, as we were passing by the village of Hilanya, there was an Israeli air strike on a fuel truck outside a small garage on the main road, setting the truck ablaze. Thick black smoke rose above the flames as the traffic was diverted and villagers hurried away from the main road and from the burning truck.

Repeated Israeli air strikes on the town have forced close to 80% of the population of Baalbak – some 120,000 - to flee. Entire neighbourhoods and suburbs are now totally deserted. Clothes hang from washing lines and cats scurry around the streets but most of the residents have left in the past two weeks. We drove through eerily silent neighbourhood after neighbourhood.

Baalbak City, 5th August

Several neighbourhoods in Baalbak have been totally destroyed by repeated Israeli bombardments. Whole blocks of houses have been reduced to lumps of rubble. Several residents have been killed in such attacks and as a result the remaining inhabitants have been forcibly displaced by the fear of such attacks. The families have moved elsewhere, flooding other cities and towns. At least 800,000 of people have been forcibly displaced from their homes by the frequent Israeli bombardments, and a country with a population of less than 4 million is struggling to cope. Some have fled to neighbouring Syria or to other countries, but hundreds of thousands are sleeping in schools and public parks.

In Baalbak we heard from eyewitnesses, including medical doctors, about how an entire family was wiped out in an Israeli air strike. During the night of 1 and 2 August, a family of agricultural workers, a husband and wife and four of their children, aged between three and fifteen were killed, and their other three children, aged from nine months to nine years, were seriously wounded, when Israeli forces launched scores of missiles into several areas of Baalbak. In the same night the air strikes killed several other people, including a pregnant woman and two children in a nearby neighbourhood.

We later investigated the reported killings of at least 23 agricultural workers in an Israeli air strike on 4 August (yesterday) on the village of al-Qaa, North of Baalbak. A local priest told us that he witnessed the air

strike from the roof of his church compound. He said that as he was preparing to leave to go to the scene of the attack to offer assistance another missile hit the same farm. He rushed there and found that at least 23 Syrian agricultural workers, including at least five women, had been killed and several others injured.

Israel mission update 2

Northern District, 5th August

On the second day of our mission, we started the day in by meeting with the director of health services for the Northern District. She is responsible for coordinating health services for approximately 1,200,000 residents, which she says is split equally between Jewish and Arab residents. Later in the day we met with the director of the mayor's office in lower Nazareth.

She explained that main difference between this conflict and ones in the past, was that many Israeli cities, towns and villages that had never been hit before by rockets were being hit for the first time. This has meant that people were not prepared, and a major impact from a public health perspective has been from people experiencing psychological trauma and anxiety. They were also helping people cope with the psychological effects of being in or in and out of shelters for 25 straight days. They had learned from past experience in dealing with trauma victims that the earlier counselling was provided the lower the long term effects were so they were trying to provide counselling to victims as soon as they could.

While the government has been trying to get as many people as possible to evacuate, many are unable or unwilling to leave. And in many cases evacuating people who were elderly or with major health problems presented logistical challenges. The government mobilized ambulances, physicians, and paramedics to move people to safety, but we were told that two elderly patients still died while being transported to safer parts of the country. According to the health ministry, about 2/3 of the populations of the population had fled from the Northern District.

For the population that is left, in addition to providing psychological services, they were dealing with the challenges of trying to provide the same basic health services they were providing in the past as well as additional health challenges presented by the civilians living in the shelters. Even with mobilizing all of its resources the authorities were only able to visit a small percentage of the shelters to make a health assessment. In cities like Nahariya and Kiryat Shmona which had been particularly hard hit, trying to provide services like chemotherapy and kidney dialysis was straining hospitals and other facilities already coping with people who had been injured.

Nazareth, North Israel, 5th August

We then went to Nazareth which is the largest Arab city in Israel. Two children had been killed in Nazareth while playing outside in the early days of the conflict. We were told that at the time there were no sirens functioning, so the children, young brothers who were outside their home playing, had no warning. The municipality representative told us that even if they had heard a siren, shelters in Arab areas are virtually non-existent, although the reasons behind this is something we need to continue to follow up on. In Nazareth most of the population has not left, although some of the more affluent residents had fled. About 50% of the population lives below the poverty line.

We also met with representatives of two women's groups who were helping Arab women deal with the conflict. In addition to dealing with their own stress over the rockets falling on Nazareth and nearby, they were also responsible for caring for their families. Since none of the nursery schools or kindergartens had shelters or safe rooms, they had to be closed down.

On our way out of town the sirens went off again. This time there were no formal shelters, but we were invited by local shopkeepers into a backroom that had no windows and was relatively safe. But the

majority of the people nearby just looked at the sky. Today, the media reported that three more Israelis, all Arabs, were killed. Yesterday, reports stated that three Israelis were killed and today three more were killed. All of the those who have died since we have arrived have been Israeli Arabs.

Clearly the Israeli health and other services are pressed to their maximum to cope with the conflict, and that is with their infrastructure still in place. We wondered what the other half of our delegation was finding in Lebanon, where most of the infrastructure had been destroyed.

The missions' diaries can be found on:

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

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