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Death Toll in Lebanon Rising From Israeli Bombardment



A Lebanese family that has been forced to live on the streets of Beirut due to recent hostilities. Credit: UNICEF/ Fouad Choufany

UNITED NATIONS, Nov 1 2024 (IPS) - The eastern region of Baalbek, Lebanon was believed to be a “safe zone” for residents, and refugees who had been displaced by the increased hostilities across the country. That changed on October 29, when an Israeli airstrike on the region resulted in over sixty casualties, including two children.

On October 30, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) issued a statement to the residents of Baalbek, warning them to evacuate before an intensive series of bombardments are set begin in that region. Prior to the attack, Baalbek was primarily exempt from violence from the IDF. According to

the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 44,000 people sheltered in Baalbek after being displaced from other areas.

Humanitarian organizations fear that the recent hostilities in Baalbek signal a widening of Israel's aerial campaign on Lebanon. "Under international humanitarian law, parties to the conflict must take all feasible precautions to avoid and minimize harm to civilians and civilian objects. Civilians must be protected at all times and wherever they are — whether they stay or whether they leave," said Stéphane Dujarric, Spokesman for the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General.

On October 28, a series of airstrikes on Tyre, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, destroyed significant civilian infrastructure and left over seventeen dead, according to the Lebanese Health Ministry. A new report by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that approximately 2,600 Lebanese civilians have been killed in the past year of fighting alone.

The Humanitarian Coordinator in Lebanon, Imran Riza, issued a statement to X (formerly known as Twitter), expressing concern for the future of Lebanon as a stable nation if this conflict continues to escalate. "Since Sunday (October 27), nearly 100 people have been killed or injured by airstrikes. Children live in constant fear, and the mental toll on communities is immeasurable. Countless people have lost their homes, their livelihoods, and their access to essential services such as healthcare," he said.

These attacks on critical infrastructures in Lebanon have had far reaching implications. Repeated bombings on farms have not only increased the chances of contamination due to the IDF's documented use of white phosphorus, but also devastated the national economy and exacerbated hunger levels.

"The problem is that we will not be able to continue, we will not be able to export our surplus, we will have depression in the market, prices will go down, the farmer won't be able to sell as they want, we will have a

very big problem,” said Mohamad Al Husseini, a farmer in south Lebanon.

According to figures from the World Food Programme (WFP), approximately 2.5 million Lebanese civilians are estimated to be acutely food insecure. “Having access to food is now a challenge for more than 50% of the population. We see people rummaging through garbage cans for food. Groups have formed on Facebook where people exchange clothes for diapers for their babies, others exchange their furniture, their children’s toys for a little money to eat. The situation is really dire,” says Bujar Hoxha, Country Director of CARE in Lebanon.

Frequent bombardments have also disrupted Lebanon’s primary irrigation systems, compromising access to clean drinking water for millions of Lebanese civilians. The Litani River, west of Baalbek, the main source of water and hydroelectricity for the entirety of Lebanon, has seen considerable damage to its irrigation system since the uptick of hostilities in September. “The ongoing hostilities have inflicted severe damage on Lebanon’s essential services, leaving hundreds of thousands without access to safe water and electricity,” said Dr. Walid Fayyad, the minister of Energy and Water.

Humanitarian organizations have denounced Israel’s violations of international humanitarian law over the course of this conflict. The IDF’s use of white phosphorus has drawn significant criticism. White phosphorus – a highly toxic substance that causes incendiary reactions when exposed to oxygen – have been used in artillery fired from IDF weapons. Exposure to white phosphorus entails fires on civilian infrastructures as well as significant and lifelong chemical injuries on people.

In a press release, Human Rights Watch (HRW) states that: “Under international humanitarian law, the use of airburst white phosphorus is unlawfully indiscriminate in populated areas and otherwise does not meet the legal requirement to take all feasible precautions to avoid civilian harm”.

Additionally, attacks have grown increasingly indiscriminate, targeting both civilians and personnel affiliated with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

“What we are witnessing in Lebanon is a massive operation which strikes, heavy bombardments, obviously also with bombardments from the Hezbollah side, but that are causing a dramatic number of civilians being killed,” said UN Secretary-General António Guterres.

UNIFIL has reported numerous instances of IDF personnel breaching their borders since September. On October 20, an IDF tank was observed firing at a UNIFIL watchtower, destroying two cameras and damaging the base. The Secretary-General has warned that attacks on peacekeepers constitute violations of international humanitarian law as well as war crimes.

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