

Israel's war on Lebanon triggers unprecedented displacement crisis

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Civilians have fled Israel's relentless bombing and looming invasion, triggering a humanitarian catastrophe. Hundreds of thousands of people have had to flee southern Lebanon because of Israeli attacks, overwhelming shelters in other parts of the country. Many have had to resort to sleeping outside in public areas [Philippe Pernot/Al Jazeera]

Beirut, October 1 (RHC)-- On Friday evening, a sudden explosion heavily damaged Dina's home in the Burj al-Barajneh Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon's capital Beirut. It was caused by the shock wave of an Israeli air attack, during which dozens of bombs were dropped at once on a nearby apartment complex in Dahiyeh, a southern suburb of the capital that is about two kilometres (1.2 miles) away from the refugee camp.

The huge attack killed Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah and an unknown number of civilians after it levelled several residential buildings, leaving thousands more destitute. The blasts shattered the glass of small shops and cars in the camp, blew doors off their hinges and devastated nearby buildings and homes, explained 35-year-old Dina.

The explosions triggered mayhem as thousands of people and vehicles in the camp rushed towards its narrow exits. Dina grabbed her 12-year-old brother and ran down the stairs from their home, where she saw their elderly mother lying on the ground covered in debris.

Initially fearing that their mother was dead, Dina's brother broke down. However, it turned out she was still conscious. "My mother was confused and delirious, but I helped her up and told her that we had to run. I knew more bombs were coming," Dina told Al Jazeera from a cafe in Hamra, a bustling neighbourhood in central Beirut that has absorbed thousands of displaced people from across Lebanon.

Israel escalated its conflict with Hezbollah in the second half of September, devastating southern Lebanon and triggering mass displacement.

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), one million people have been uprooted from their homes due to Israel's attacks, 90 percent of them in the last week.

But Lebanon's caretaker government -- operating without a president and reeling from a severe economic crisis -- has struggled to respond to people's needs. Thousands are sleeping on the floors of classrooms after the government converted more than 500 schools into displacement shelters.

Thousands of others are sleeping in mosques, under bridges and in the streets. But the crisis could get even worse now that Israel has begun a ground offensive.

"A ground invasion will compound the problem," said Karim Emile Bitar, a professor of international relations at Saint Joseph University in Beirut. "We already have more than one million people who left their homes. That is around the same number we had in 1982, when Israel invaded Lebanon and reached Beirut."

Moments after Israel announced its ground offensive, it ordered civilians to evacuate 29 towns in south Lebanon. Nora Serhan, who is originally from southern Lebanon, said that her uncle remains in one of the border villages. He refused to leave when Hezbollah and Israel began an initially low-scale conflict on October 8, 2023.

Hezbollah had begun firing projectiles at Israel with the stated aim of reducing pressure on its ally Hamas in Gaza, where Israel has killed more than 41,600 people and uprooted nearly the entire 2.3 million population.

The devastating war on Gaza followed a Hamas-led attack on southern Israel, in which 1,139 people were killed and around 250 taken captive.

After Israel and Hezbollah began exchanging fire, Serhan's uncle chose to stay put. She suspects that he did not want to abandon his house and surroundings, even though the conflict cut off his water and electricity. But since Israel announced its ground offensive, Serhan's family lost contact with him.

“When [Israel escalated the war last week], I think that maybe it became safer for my uncle to stay in the village than to risk fleeing on the roads,” she told Al Jazeera.

Hundreds of thousands of people have abandoned their homes and villages to seek safety in Beirut, as well as in towns further north.

Abdel Latif Hamada, 57, fled his home in southern Lebanon last week after Israel began bombing the region. He said that a bomb killed one of his neighbours, while another was trapped inside his home after rubble and debris piled up outside the entrance.

Hamada risked his own life to clear the rubble and save his neighbour. He said that they were able to flee five minutes before Israel bombed their own homes.

“I didn’t rescue him. God rescued him,” said Hamada, a bald man with a nest of wrinkles around his eyes.

Despite fleeing just in time, Hamada wasn’t safe yet. He hitched an exhausting and terrifying 14-hour ride to Beirut – the journey typically takes four. Thousands of cars were squeezed together trying to reach safety, while roads were obstructed by rubble and stones that were blown off nearby homes and buildings.

“Israeli planes were all over the sky and we saw them drop bombs in front of us. I often had to get out of the vehicle to help clear the debris and stones obstructing our car,” Hamada told Al Jazeera.

As he took another drag from his cigarette, Hamada said that he wasn’t scared when Israel escalated its attacks. Over the course of his life, Israel has displaced him three times from his village, including during its invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and its devastating assault on the country in 2006. In the latter war, an Israeli bomb fell on his home and killed his wife Khadeja.

“I’m not scared for my own life anymore. I’m just scared of what awaits the generation ahead of me,” Hamada said.

Civilians and analysts fear that the ongoing displacement crisis could end up being protracted – even permanent.

According to Michael Young, an expert on Lebanon with the Carnegie Middle East Centre, Israel’s objective over the last two weeks has been to create a major humanitarian crisis for the Lebanese state and particularly for Hezbollah, which represents many Shia Muslims in the country.

“What’s worrisome is what will Israel do when it does invade? Will they begin dynamiting homes as they did in Gaza? In other words, do they make the temporary humanitarian crisis a permanent one by ensuring that nobody can return [to their homes]?” Young asked.

“This is a big question mark,” he said. “Once the villages are emptied, what will the Israelis do to them?”

Hamada and Dina both vow to return to their homes again, when they can.

Dina said her father and sister have already gone back to Burj al-Barajneh – now a ghost town – due to the terrible conditions in the displacement shelters, where there are few basic provisions and no running water.

She added that there is a growing feeling among everyone in the country that Israel will turn large swathes of Lebanon into a disaster zone, just as they did in Gaza.

“They are going to do the same thing here that they did in Gaza,” Dina said. “This is a war on civilians.”

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