

After attack, north Lebanon villagers fear Israel targets displaced people

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A red 'I love you' teddy bear lies in the ruins of a two-storey apartment block in Ain Yaaqoub, Akkar, Lebanon, in the aftermath of an Israeli air raid on Monday night [Raghd Waked/Al Jazeera]

The villagers of Ain Yaaqoub spent days identifying charred remains. They fear Israel was targeting displaced people.

By Madeline Edwards

Ain Yaaqoub, November 14 (RHC)-- Shredded clothing, dusty broken table legs, torn copies of the Quran, a red "I love you" teddy bear and a book on Aristotle amid piles of socks – these, among many other things, lie strewn amid the rubble in the northern Lebanese village of Ain Yaaqoub in Akkar following a deadly Israeli air raid.

Beneath all this, at least one body remains trapped under the rubble of what was a two-storey apartment building, Red Cross rescuers say. Metres away, charred, unrecognisable body parts litter the ground.

Monday night's Israeli air strike on Ain Yaaqoub in this remote, far northern corner of Lebanon, killed at least 14 people, says Walid Semaan, head of the Lebanese Red Cross.

This was the second Israeli attack on Akkar, Lebanon's northernmost governorate, since Israel ramped up its deadly bombardment of Lebanon in late September. The previous hit, a week before, destroyed a bridge linking two remote villages in the mountainous region. Nobody was killed that time around.

The attack on Monday, however, was even further north and was nothing less than a "massacre", according to people in Ain Yaaqoub, taking out not only the apartment building but many more homes around it as well.

"There were so many women and children," says Feryal Harb, whose deceased brother owned the building that was struck. She weeps as she sits on a concrete block next to the wreckage while neighbours unearth family photo albums and Qurans, handing them to her in succession. "We have so many memories here," she says.

A little way up the hill from the blast site, Red Cross volunteers shout that they have found more body parts.

Another relative, Hassan Sahmarouni, says he believes the building had been housing about 26 people. But rescuers could not determine which of the dead they unearthed were women, men or children; their bodies were charred and crushed beyond recognition.

At a nearby government hospital are 14 wounded, expected to survive. Another hospital received a burned torso late on Monday night; administrators say they cannot yet determine its identity.

The concrete building housed a Syrian woman and her four daughters who had moved in several years ago. One floor above them was a Lebanese family who had arrived in recent weeks from southern Lebanon's Nabatieh district, fleeing Israeli bombs, neighbours told Al Jazeera. It was not clear to them why this building in a tiny mountain village, surrounded by olive groves and little else, was struck.

"They kept to themselves, we never got to know them," says Amina Radwan, a mother of four, whose next-door home is now mangled and blanketed in shards of window glass. She and her children had been out of the house shopping for groceries when the bomb hit. "If we got back home five minutes earlier, God knows what would have happened."

With so many dead and multiple surrounding homes ripped apart, residents here now fear they are no longer isolated from a war that has, until now, spared them.

Since October last year, Israeli strikes on Lebanon have killed about 3,300 people, the majority of them since Israel's onslaught escalated in September. More than 1.2 million people have fled their homes in these two months. Tens of thousands have taken refuge in schools converted into shelters.

Others, however, have moved into vacant apartments in quieter areas of the country away from the front lines, including here in mountainous Akkar.

Some 170 km (105 miles) from Lebanon's embattled southern border and a three-hour drive from the capital, Beirut, Akkar's remoteness has long meant government neglect. With few job opportunities, many residents work in agriculture or join the army – lending the governorate its nickname, “storehouse of the army”.

But since Israel began its onslaught on Gaza which triggered a near-daily exchange of fire with Hezbollah across the border in Lebanon more than a year ago, that distance gave Akkar a sense of relative safety.

“We didn't think this could happen here,” says Ahmed Rakhieh, who lives right next to the bomb site. “Now, khalas [enough]! Nowhere is safe.”

Moments later, the sound of an unseen Israeli fighter jet reverberates.

Steps from the destroyed building, 45-year-old Ammar Khodr's ground-floor kitchen has been blown out, leaving just a mishmash of roof tiles and splintered cabinets. “I can't fix anything,” he says, dazed. Instead, he is simply “sleeping among the ashes”, while his five children are now staying with relatives.

Next door, at Amina Radwan's house, her children's beds are covered in broken glass. She says she is worried that there may have been Hezbollah members among the displaced who took up residence next door, and this may have prompted Israel's Monday night bombing. “[Hezbollah supporters] shouldn't come and live among us here, around children and innocent people.”

Rumours were circulating on Tuesday that the target of the previous night's strike was a family member of Hezbollah leader Naim Qassem. But a family friend of one of the injured, also from Nabatieh, tells Al Jazeera from the Akkar hospital that the building residents were “innocent” and did not belong to Hezbollah.

Amina Khodr, who lives next door to the destroyed building and whose face was cut by broken glass in the Israeli bombing on Monday night [Raghad Waked/Al Jazeera]

About 10,500 displaced people from Lebanon's south and the Bekaa Valley – areas under heavy Israeli bombardment – have taken refuge in this part of Akkar, according to a local official who requested anonymity.

Some 120 of them are in al-Ayoun, the next village over from Ain Yaaqoub, Asaad Ibrahim, a municipal council member, says, sitting in his garden on Tuesday afternoon, less than 24 hours after the deadly Israeli attack, with his family members.

At first, in September, when Israeli strikes forced hundreds of thousands to flee, there was a sense of solidarity in Akkar, says Ibrahim. Residents were proud to provide housing for their countrymen, displaced from the front line – no formal rental contracts required.

“But people are scared now,” he says. The mosque next to his home sounds out the noontime call to prayer. September's solidarity is fading. Is Akkar still far removed from the war, after Monday night?

Ibrahim and others told Al Jazeera on Tuesday they fear the Israeli bombing, and the deaths and damage it caused, could ignite social tensions towards the displaced Lebanese, most of whom are Shia Muslims now living in a majority Sunni and Christian part of northern Lebanon which has no traditional support base for Hezbollah.

One block away from Ibrahim's house, on their balcony overlooking a quiet alleyway, two women from a displaced south Lebanon family declined to be interviewed, saying they fear social repercussions.

Loved ones of those injured in Monday's strike, whom Al Jazeera found gathered at the nearby government hospital, also declined interviews, still upset by the bombing and fearful of security risks should they speak with the press.

Among the injured survivors is Akil Harb, a young NGO project manager from Nabatieh whose childhood friend, Hassan Hassan, is waiting in the emergency ward hallway. "He's in shock," Hassan says. "His father and two siblings died, and his mother was wounded ... People are still too upset to speak." Hassan insists he still feels welcome in north Lebanon after locals donated blood following Monday night's Israeli strike.

Hassan Sahmarouni, the cousin of the destroyed building's owner, says he won't lay blame on the displaced family from Nabatieh. "We don't see them as 'refugees from the south'," he says, standing atop the debris.

Later on, Radwan's four daughters sweep up glass in what remains of their home into little piles.

A bucket of olives, gathered two days ago as part of the yearly harvest, sits in the kitchen, spoiled by shards of window. The girls gather bags of clothing to take elsewhere, ready to flee a war that has now reached Akkar.

Outside, Red Cross volunteers fish out charred bits of former neighbours from the ground and collect them in plastic biohazard bags; it is all that is left of them.

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