

Under bombs in Lebanon, Americans feel abandoned

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Rubble remains at the site of an Israeli air strike on the Bir el-Abed neighbourhood in Beirut's southern suburbs on October 1 [Anwar Amro/AFP]

Washington, October 4 (RHC)-- Karam, an American citizen stranded in Lebanon, says she feels as if she does not matter to the United States government.

Lebanon has been facing relentless Israeli bombardment — part of a US-backed campaign that has killed hundreds and displaced more than a million people, according to the United Nations.

In recent days, however, the conflict has escalated, as the Israeli military launched a ground invasion in southern Lebanon.

On Monday, Karam called the US embassy in Beirut for help fleeing the violence. But she said she was told to find a way out of the country by herself.

Karam, who chose to be identified by her nickname out of fear of retaliation, drew a contrast with how the US State Department swiftly chartered special flights and a ship to evacuate American citizens in Israel after Hamas's October 7 attack last year.

"Americans of Lebanese descent have been treated as lesser US citizens than Israeli US citizens. It is as if we don't exist," Karam told Al Jazeera.

On Wednesday, the administration of President Joe Biden announced that it contracted its first flight to evacuate U.S. citizens from Beirut to Istanbul, nine days after Israel started its offensive in Lebanon.

State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said the flight carried 100 US citizens – a fraction of the nearly 6,000 Americans who have contacted the US embassy for information and help.

Miller said that the U.S. administration is hoping to organise more flights but added that he would not announce them because they may not materialise "for whatever reason."

He also indicated the US government would rely on commercial airlines to address any unmet demand. "We have been working to make seats available or to find seats available on existing commercial flights," he said.

However, in past conflicts, including the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, Israeli forces bombed the runways of the airport in Beirut. And in recent days, the Israeli military has conducted air raids blocks away from the airport, raising concern about the safety of civilian aviation in the country.

Since September 23, all foreign airlines have cancelled their flights to Lebanon, leaving the country's Middle East Airlines (MEA) as the sole company flying out of the international airport in Beirut.

MEA offers about 30 flights daily to destinations in Europe and the Middle East – far short of the growing demands of people looking to leave Lebanon.

Prices have also spiked due to the crisis. For example, as of Wednesday, the next available MEA flight to Istanbul was on October 27, at a cost of \$310 for a one-way ticket. Other flights have sold out.

Last week, Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, who represents a large Lebanese community in Michigan, accused the US government of failing its citizens abroad. "Our residents keep booking those 'available flights,' and they are canceled repeatedly, and guess what? The cost of airfare for the one available commercial flight is \$8,000," she wrote in a social media post.

Karam, who is from south Lebanon, is now staying in the mountainous area east of Beirut, which has largely been spared from Israeli attacks. But she said she is afraid of moving within the country or visiting her son in the capital because Israel can bomb anything, anywhere, at any moment.

While Israel has focused its air raids on Lebanon's south, as well as the Bekaa Valley in the east and the Beirut suburbs of Dahiyeh, bombs have targeted other areas, including within the capital's city limits.

"Israel says they are following Hezbollah, but they are dropping bombs everywhere," Karam said. "The innocent people of the south and Dahiyeh have paid the price. And we don't know how long the people will be displaced."

The U.S. embassy in Beirut has put out advisories urging people to leave and rolled out an assistance intake form, but many people who filled out the application said they have not received a response beyond the publicly available instructions.

Kamal Makki, a Michigan resident, said his father was trapped in Lebanon after his flight was cancelled. All the while, the country was being bombarded. His father received no help from the U.S. government to escape the violence, Makki added.

“Yes, commercial flights are available, but they’re not available for everybody. There are only so many people that can get on a flight, so you basically have to wait and see when it’s your turn – and if your flight does not get cancelled,” he said.

Makki’s father, a U.S. citizen, was visiting family in Lebanon when the conflict with Israel escalated. On Tuesday, after days of waiting, he was finally able to get a flight to Baghdad, but during his layover, flights out of Iraq were cancelled due to the Iranian missile attack against Israel. Now he is stranded again.

With Israel intensifying its attacks across the region, critics say the US government must engage in a serious effort to evacuate its citizens in Lebanon via land and sea as it did for Americans in Israel in October of last year.

Makki said the Biden administration is not treating Arab Americans fairly: “It’s always been the view that Israeli lives are more important than Arab lives.”

Abed Ayoub, executive director of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, said Americans stuck in Lebanon are experiencing confusion due to the US embassy’s poor communication. He also argued that a single evacuation flight is far from adequate, and he stressed that the U.S. has the ability and know-how to send enough flights and ships to get its citizens out.

“It’s a reflection of American foreign policy and American priorities, and Arab Americans and Muslim Americans are low on both lists for them,” Ayoub told Al Jazeera.

Other countries appear to have been more proactive in helping their citizens in Lebanon. Canada said on Monday that it reserved 800 seats on commercial flights for Canadian nationals in Lebanon, while Germany has arranged two evacuation flights that transferred 240 people out of the country.

With Israel expanding the breadth of its bombardment in Lebanon, advocates say more US citizens will be at risk. The Israeli campaign has already targeted roads and residential buildings – many housing displaced civilians.

On Tuesday, for instance, an Israeli bombardment killed longtime Michigan resident Kamel Jawad. “It’s our understanding that it was a legal permanent resident, not an American citizen, but we obviously offer our sincerest condolences to the family on their loss,” Miller, the State Department spokesperson, said on Wednesday when asked about the incident.

But Jawad was not just a US resident, but an American citizen, according to his family. His daughter Nadine said he was killed in the southern Lebanese town of Nabatieh while helping elderly and displaced people.

“My father’s actions are part of a much larger movement of people who refuse to stay silent in face of oppression,” she said in a statement.

“His life is one of over 50,000 lost at the hand of Israeli aggression across the Middle East. The fact that he was an American citizen should not make his story more important than others. As Muslims, we believe every life matters. If my dad’s story stands out to you, every other civilian murdered by the Israeli regime should as well.”

Ayoub of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee said that Jawad was a pillar of the Arab American community in Michigan: revered, respected and loved by all. “He was a mentor to many. He gave back to the community. He was there for everybody. He raised an incredible family,” Ayoub said of Jawad.

He added that Miller’s “smug” and dismissive remarks highlight the administration’s view of Arabs and Arab Americans. “It’s as if they’re intentionally trying to see our people killed, intentionally downplaying us and dehumanising us,” he said.

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