

# Israel prepares major escalation of Lebanon aggression

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The Israeli government issued orders Thursday to mobilize as many as 40,000 additional reserve soldiers in preparation for an escalation of its war of aggression against Lebanon. The action was taken by the security cabinet of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in response to mounting demands from the military brass and the media for a full-scale invasion of south Lebanon.

The large-scale reserve call-up is but one indication that Israel is preparing a massive escalation of violence against the Lebanese population. Israeli Justice Minister Haim Ramon gave an interview to Israel's Army Radio in which he said that the Israeli air force should bomb Lebanese towns and villages before the ground forces enter in order to cut Israeli casualties. Asked if this meant destroying villages and their civilian population, he responded, "These places are not villages. They are military bases in which Hezbollah people are hiding and from which they are operating."

Ramon hailed the outcome of the Rome conference of the major imperialist powers and selected Arab countries, held Wednesday to discuss the Lebanese crisis. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice blocked all efforts to pass a resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire. Ramon interpreted this outcome—quite correctly—as a green light for further Israeli destruction of Lebanon.

"We received yesterday at the Rome conference permission from the world... to continue the operation, this war, until Hezbollah won't be located in Lebanon and until it is disarmed," he declared.

The Israeli ruling elite has been shocked by the fierce resistance which Hezbollah fighters have put up in towns like Bint Jbail and Maroun el Ras, just across the border from Israel. Nine Israeli soldiers were killed early Wednesday when they were sent into a well-prepared trap in Bint Jbail.

As troops of the Golani Brigade entered the center of the town, thinking that air strikes had reduced the resistance to a few dozen men, hundreds of Hezbollah fighters opened fire on them from all sides. It was an hour before the Israeli troops could even mount serious return fire, and the town remains contested despite incessant air and artillery pounding.

The setback at Bint Jbail triggered a firestorm of media criticism of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and the Olmert government. Newspapers from the liberal *Haaretz* to the more conservative *Yediot Aharonot* blasted the military tactics as inept, demanded a commitment of tens of thousands of troops, and warned that failure to inflict a highly visible military defeat on Hezbollah would represent an enormous political, psychological and strategic blow

to the Israeli state.

In the daily newspaper *Maariv*, Amir Rappaport criticized “the enormous gap between the military challenge posed by Hezbollah, a shadowy guerrilla organization equipped with the best Iranian and Syrian weaponry, and the relatively smaller number of troops that took part in the incursion.”

In *Yediot Aharonot*, military correspondent Alex Fishman declared, “The public does not quite understand the ground offensive and has the feeling that something about this machine is not working—that it is too slow, too limited, too many accidents, that it should look different.”

The long-time military affairs commentator for *Haaretz*, Ze’ev Schiff, declared that Hezbollah “must be destroyed at any price,” warning, “If Hezbollah does not experience defeat in this war, this will spell the end of Israeli deterrence against its enemies.” He expressed particular concern that failure to destroy Hezbollah would inspire a new wave of resistance from the Palestinian population of the West Bank, making the territory uncontrollable.

The security cabinet’s order to mobilize three reserve divisions was accompanied by assurances from Olmert that his government had decided not to carry out a full-scale invasion of Lebanon or press beyond the border area in which ground operations have been confined. But as the Associated Press noted, “the large size of the mobilization—one division has 12,000 to 15,000 soldiers—raised questions about officials’ insistence that they were not contemplating a wider offensive.”

Defense Minister Amir Peretz boasted that the campaign of bombing and border incursions had already inflicted a strategic defeat on Hezbollah, and he declared that the purpose of the offensive was “changing the reality on the northern border.” But despite this claim, Hezbollah was able to launch over 150 rockets in the 24 hours ending Thursday night, Israeli time, the heaviest bombardment of the two-week-long war. Rockets hit Kiryat Shmona, Haifa, Safed, Carmiel, Maalot and Shlomi, among other cities and towns.

A Likud member of the Knesset who heads a defense preparedness committee, Yuval Steinitz, called for a far more aggressive prosecution of the war both in the air and on the ground. Steinitz revealed that secret committee hearings had debated the IDF plans for an air war against Hezbollah two years ago. This underscores that despite the media campaign to paint Israeli as the innocent victim of terrorism, the war of aggression against Lebanon has been in preparation for a long time, awaiting only a suitable pretext.

While invariably described in the American and Israeli media as “terrorists,” Hezbollah has performed as a well-trained military force in the first two weeks of war. Its fighters should be called what they are: Arab soldiers fighting courageously for their people and their land against an invading army which has enormous superiority in firepower and numbers, and uncontested control of the air.

The saturation bombing of Lebanon continues, with one report estimating that more than 2,000 Israeli air strikes have been conducted since the July 12, each strike delivering anywhere from one to four tons of explosives in the form of bombs and missiles. In addition, there has been constant shelling of border towns and villages that are within the range of Israeli artillery, as well as shelling of coastal areas by Israeli gunboats.

The cumulative bomb tonnage dropped on Lebanon has probably already exceed the destructive power of the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki (the equivalent of 10,000 tons of TNT), and will soon approach that of Hiroshima (20,000 tons). This is a criminal devastation of a largely defenseless country.

The Lebanese health minister said Thursday that at least 600 civilians have been killed in the bombing, including as many as 200 still buried in the rubble of destroyed buildings. Each day brings new reports of atrocities committed by Israeli Air Force: the targeting of ambulances, cars driven by refugees clearly marked with white flags, trucks bringing medical supplies, food and water to the hundreds of thousands trapped in the war zone.

The monitoring group Human Rights Watch charged that Israel used cluster bombs on the Lebanese village of Blida July 19, killing one woman and wounding 12 more civilians, seven of them children. Major General Beni Gantz, the Israeli commander in the area, admitted that the IDF has employed cluster bombs as part of the arsenal of weapons unleashed on Lebanon, although he claimed, "We try to minimize their use."

Perhaps the most flagrant war crime was the deliberate destruction of an outpost of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) on Tuesday, killing four unarmed observers from China, Canada, Austria and Finland.

UN officials have provided new details of the doomed effort to persuade the Israeli Defense Forces not to target the outpost and murder the four observers. Jane Holl Lute, assistant secretary general for peacekeeping operations, told a Wednesday session of the Security Council that UN officials in both New York and Lebanon made repeated calls to the Israeli UN mission and the IDF command after bombs and missiles began to strike the outpost at Khiam in southern Lebanon.

Among those making the calls were Lute herself, deputy secretary general Mark Malloch Brown, Khaled Mansour, a UN spokesman in Lebanon, and Major General Alain Pellegrini, commander of UNIFIL. Lt. Col. John Molloy, the senior Irish officer in the UN observer force in south Lebanon, reported making six calls to his Israeli counterparts before the strike on the post, according to an Irish defense ministry spokeswoman. "He warned the Israelis that they were shelling in very close proximity to the post, and his warnings were very specific, explicit, detailed and stark. Obviously those warnings went unheeded," the spokeswoman said.

A total of 21 strikes were made on the Khiam post, 11 of them air strikes—in which the pilots would have had a clear view of the UN flag and insignia—and at least six artillery strikes. Lute noted that the UN post was "well known and clearly marked" and said there had been no Hezbollah activity near it. The post has been used by UNIFIL for decades.

When a UNIFIL force consisting of soldiers from India went to relieve the outpost, eventually recovering the bodies of the slain observers, Israeli forces continued firing on the position.

This war crime has two clear purposes, one tactical, the other political. The IDF wanted no UN scrutiny of its cross-border ground operations, which went into high gear shortly after the UN observers were killed. More broadly, the Israeli regime is sending a message to any country which might contribute troops to a future peacekeeping force in the region: the IDF will brook no opposition to whatever methods it chooses to employ against the Lebanese people or anyone else it targets.

The Bush administration intervened in the UN Security Council deliberations, as it did at the Rome conference, to block any criticism of Israel. The Security Council adopted a resolution declaring itself “deeply shocked and distressed” by the attacks on UN peacekeepers, but any stronger language was abandoned after the US ambassador, John Bolton, threatened a veto.

Bolton cited Israeli assurances that the killings were “an operational mistake” and said that he had seen “no evidence to the contrary.” He refused to permit language directly condemning the killing of United Nations personnel in a resolution adopted by the UN’s highest body. Even a general statement which made no reference to the Khiam atrocity or to Israel—“the Security Council condemns any deliberate attack against UN personnel”—was blocked. Bolton also insisted that the resolution should not call for a UN investigation of the killing, but instead call on Israel to investigate itself.

One only has to contrast this despicable cover-up to the response from the Bush administration and the US media to the August 2003 bombing of the UN offices in Baghdad, in which the top UN official in Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello, was killed. The targeting of the United Nations, the US government declared, proved that the bombers were the enemies of all humanity. There is no such conclusion drawn after an equally deliberate strike on a UN facility by the state of Israel.

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