

Israeli PM Olmert : ‘There is no ceasefire. There will not be any ceasefire’

By [Global Research](#)

Global Research, August 01, 2006

The Guardian 1 August 2006

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‘There is no ceasefire. There will not be any ceasefire’

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/israel/Story/0,,1834536,00.html>

Israeli PM Olmert issues grim warning as US blocks moves for immediate cessation of hostilities

Ewen MacAskill, Simon Tisdall and Clancy Chassay in Beirut

Tuesday August 1, 2006

Guardian



An international drive for a ceasefire in Lebanon halted yesterday amid sharp differences at the UN security council, Israel’s rejection of any truce in the near future and a Hizbullah warning that it would oppose the deployment of a multinational security force.

Amid undiminished outrage after the Qana tragedy and complaints that the UN was doing nothing, Condoleezza Rice, the US secretary of state, said she was convinced a sustainable ceasefire could be achieved at the security council this week.

But Israel signalled dissent hours after she left Jerusalem for Washington. Ehud Olmert, its prime minister, shrugged off international pressure: “The fighting continues. There is no ceasefire and there will not be any ceasefire in the coming days.

“We are not fighting against the Lebanese people. We are not fighting against its government. We are fighting terrorism and we will not stop the fight against them until we push them away from our borders.”

Late last night Israel’s cabinet approved a wider ground offensive after military chiefs pressed to take forces deeper into Lebanon. An extra three divisions of reservists, about 15,000 soldiers, are to be called up, with reports suggesting the IDF plans to drive Hizbullah back to the Litani river, 13 miles north of the border.

Israel, backed by the US, is insisting that the multinational force be put in place before it halts its operations. France and other countries which could contribute to a proposed 20,000-strong force are determined that a ceasefire and the framework for a political agreement between Israel and Lebanon must precede deployment.

A senior official from one of the countries that may make up the force said: "We are quite adamant. You have to have an immediate ceasefire and then you need a political agreement, and only then can this encompass an international force. The purpose of the force is to help the Lebanese government and the Lebanese people. It is not to fight Hizbullah."

The differences over the timing of the deployment led to the last-minute postponement yesterday of a planned UN meeting of potential troop donors – including France, Italy, Greece, Sweden, Norway, Indonesia, Turkey and Egypt. There are also disagreements over the rules of engagement for the force, including the extent to which it should be involved in forcibly expelling Hizbullah from the Israeli border.

Mohammed Fneish, a Hizbullah cabinet minister, told the Guardian that Israel's agreement to suspend air strikes for 48 hours while the Qana attack was investigated was "nothing more than deception". He said Hizbullah wanted "an immediate ceasefire and prisoner exchange, adding: "The discussion of a comprehensive solution is, in our opinion, a cover for the aggression. This war is no longer an Israeli war. The US took over this war to achieve goals that go well beyond the prisoners. Condoleezza Rice wants to rearrange the region and settle scores.

"In principle we have nothing against Unifil troops [the existing 2,000-strong UN force in Lebanon]. We will only accept Unifil troops. No other foreign forces are acceptable."

Yesterday's developments suggest the plan put by Tony Blair to George Bush in Washington on Friday was overly optimistic. Mr Blair promised a swift insertion of the force, suggesting it was the key to a solution and saying a ceasefire was a matter of urgency.

But Mr Bush repeated that any ceasefire must contribute to "a long-lasting peace, one that is sustainable" and again cast the conflict as part of a global battle between good and evil: "The current crisis is part of a larger struggle between the forces of freedom and the forces of terror in the Middle East.

"Lebanon's democratic government must be empowered to exercise sole authority over its territory. A multinational force must be dispatched to Lebanon quickly so we can help speed the delivery of humanitarian aid to the Lebanese people. Iran must end its financial support and supply of weapons to terrorist groups like Hizbullah. Syria must end its support for terror and respect the sovereignty of Lebanon."

But, in another sign of international division, Philippe Douste-Blazy, France's foreign minister, praised Iran as "a great country, a great people, and a great civilisation which is respected and which plays a stabilising role in the region".

Despite such disagreements, Ms Rice said there was an "emerging consensus on what is necessary for an urgent ceasefire and a lasting settlement". She said: "Based on what we have accomplished, and the urgency of the situation, we will call for the UN security council action this week on a comprehensive settlement that includes three parts: a ceasefire, the political principles that provide for a long-term settlement, and the authorisation of an international force to support the Lebanese army in keeping the peace."

But a French draft resolution, circulated at the UN, makes its top priority "an immediate cessation of hostilities" and says an agreement on a political framework between Israel and

Lebanon must come before the deployment of an international force. It also foresees a continuing role for Unifil, at least until the new deployment takes place.

Lebanon will be discussed by EU foreign ministers in Brussels today, where Margaret Beckett, the foreign secretary, faces isolation. Alone among EU members, Britain has supported the US-Israeli line in blocking an immediate ceasefire and has refused to condemn Israeli actions as "disproportionate".

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