

Standing up for Canada? The Harper government's refusal to demand an end to the bombings of Lebanon

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Global Research, July 25, 2006
25 July 2006

Region: [Canada](#)

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For two weeks, tiny Lebanon has been pounded by bombs, shells and high tech missiles from land, sea and air. Its coast is blockaded, its airport smashed. Sixty plus bridges have been destroyed; roads, schools, ports, churches, mosques, grain depots, radio, television and telephone towers, ambulances, power stations, fuel depots, a hospital, milk factory, pharmaceutical plant and entire residential city blocks pulverized. Frantic relatives with bare hands try to free those buried alive.

Officially 384 Lebanese civilians are dead, one third of them children, thousands wounded, some 800,000 rendered homeless. The numbers are rising daily.

A million tourists, expats and "snowbirds," including roughly 50,000 Canadians, were trapped in the country. Twenty fleeing civilians were burned alive by Israeli missiles after being ordered from their homes.

The Israeli government stated that the bombardment of its neighbour is a reaction to the capture of two of its soldiers by Hezbollah guerrillas operating from Lebanon, and that its operations will continue indefinitely. Seventeen Israeli civilians have been killed by shells fired from Lebanon after Israel began bombing.

The Lebanese prime minister begs for international intervention and a cessation of hostilities saying his country has suffered "unimaginable losses" and is being "ripped to shreds." Jan Egeland, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, called the bombing "horrific" and "a violation of humanitarian law." The secretary general of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, demands an immediate ceasefire: "The excessive use of force is to be condemned. Israel's disproportionate use of force and collective punishment of the Lebanese people must stop."

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, issued a warning concerning war crimes. "International law demands accountability. The scale of killings in the region, and their predictability, could engage the personal criminal responsibility of those involved, particularly those in a position of command and control."

Canada is a charter member of the United Nations with a long, active history in international affairs, peacekeeping and mediation. The current Canadian government was recently elected promising to "stand up for Canada."

With 50,000 Canadians in harm's way what has been our government's response? Canada's

new UN ambassador, John McNee, told the Security Council that Israel's action in Lebanon "was an exercise in its right to self-defence." The minister of foreign affairs, Peter MacKay, refused point blank to endorse the secretary general's call for a ceasefire. Prime Minister Stephen Harper stated: "Israel's response, under the circumstances, has been measured." He announced that it was "too early" to call for a ceasefire. These words, in essence, signalled a green light from Canada for the bombing to continue.

Eight visiting Canadians, including four children, were killed by Israeli bombs. The Canadian government made no protest. Is this Mr. Harper's idea of "standing up for Canada?"

Anyone can understand the difficulty of putting together a mass evacuation under bombardment; what cannot be understood, or forgiven, is the refusal of our government to demand an end to the hostilities creating the chaos and suffering.

The Harper government's abject response to the murder of Canadians and its refusal to demand an end to the bombing constitutes an abandonment of its duty to protect Canadians and to defend the rule of law on behalf of all humanity.

If one ignores that 400,000 Palestinians driven from their land have existed for decades in refugee camps in Lebanon; that Israel routinely crosses borders, captures and assassinates Palestinians, including elected leaders; that it has over 9,000 in its jails, including some Lebanese; and if one accepts Mr. Harper's thesis that Hezbollah is a terrorist organization, then a comparison could be made with Britain responding to the capture of two of its soldiers by the IRA in Northern Ireland by reducing Dublin's airport and the rest of Ireland's infrastructure to rubble. Who could defend that as a "measured" response?

Gideon Levy, writing in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, said, "In Gaza, a soldier is abducted from the army of a state that frequently abducts civilians from their homes and locks them up for years without a trial — but only we're allowed to do that. And only we're allowed to bomb civilian population centres."

Our government in Ottawa has, whether for reasons of religion or ideology, sided uncritically with a foreign government, in this case Israel's, at the expense of our own national interests as Canadians and law abiding members of the world community.

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