

Aid agencies struggle in Lebanon: Humanitarian situation "catastrophic"

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After weeks of Israeli-Hezbollah fighting, waves of people from southern Lebanon holding white flags continued to travel toward Beirut as major relief and church agencies warned that the country faces a humanitarian disaster because of severe difficulties in providing assistance.

"The humanitarian situation is catastrophic," said Aline Papazian of the Middle East Council of Churches, a member of the global alliance Action by Churches Together (ACT) International. "We have almost 1 million people living as refugees in makeshift buildings, such as churches, parks or schools."

Geneva-based ACT and its partners, along with other agencies, were bringing what relief they could in early August to meet the immediate needs of those seeking shelter in the centers for displaced persons that had sprung up over the weeks since the bombardments started.

Several trucks carrying provisions, such as food and medicines, have been bombed, said Papazian. "We currently rent ten to 15 minibuses in order to minimize the risk of being hit. But it is hard to find drivers willing to risk their lives. It is also difficult to find petrol, which has become enormously expensive."

(Mainline Protestants agencies in the U.S. began sending donations in July to ACT agencies for civilian relief work, and the United Methodist Committee on Relief issued an appeal July 25 for funds, noting that its monies for Middle East emergencies had fallen "painfully low." Also, the American Jewish Committee said August 1 that it has worked with Magen David Adom, Israel's humanitarian agency, to supply packages of baby supplies, children's toys and first aid kits to residents in northern Israel who have sought shelter from Hezbollah missiles.)

The Israeli air strikes in Lebanon apparently forced many people to stay in their bombed towns and villages, unable to make their escape.

“This is not a tsunami where you can see the people who have been affected,” said Dominic Nutt of ACT member Christian Aid, referring to the massive ocean wave that swept across South and Southeast Asia following an undersea earthquake in late 2004. “By definition, these people are in hiding. They have run away from the bombing.”

Adding to the problems, Nutt noted, many people have been stuck in their villages, and aid workers, including United Nations personnel, have been unable to reach them. “Those that are left are either too old, too weak or too poor to move,” he said.

“We are afraid of what lies ahead over the next few days. We are afraid for the children of Lebanon,” said a 73-year-old woman huddled on the floor in the National Evangelical School of Saida in southern Lebanon, where the streets are filled with the sounds of ambulance sirens.

“Look at me,” said the woman, who identified herself only as Walaba. “I have problems with my blood pressure, diabetes, my hip [was] broken. I cannot move without my stick,” she said while sitting on some blankets on the hard concrete floor of the center for internally displaced people. She lost most of her belongings when she fled her home with her family.

The Roman Catholic agency Caritas Internationalis said it was becoming increasingly difficult to give adequate care to those in need because services and infrastructure have come under enormous pressure.

“More than one Caritas team has indicated problems with water distribution, as the supply of water in certain centers is not sufficient for the increased need,” Caritas Lebanon said in a statement. “There is a risk of rapidly worsening sanitary conditions.”

Tor Valla, of ACT affiliate Norwegian Church Aid, said the global aid alliance is trying to meet some of the needs of the internally displaced. “At the same time we are making plans as to how we can effectively meet the crisis that will be there once a cease-fire is in place,” Valla said. “Most of the people we have spoken to are clear that they want to go home if they can.” *-Ecumenical News International*