



From the Rubble

Post-War Images of Lebanon

Photographs and words by Jon Elmer

For four weeks in the fall of 2006, photojournalist Jon Elmer traveled through South Lebanon and the southern suburbs of Beirut — the front lines of Israel's summer war against Hezbollah — documenting the aftermath of Lebanon's devastation and Hezbollah's declared victory.



LEFT: THIS HEZBOLLAH RECONSTRUCTION tent in Dahiya, a southern suburb of Beirut, is the headquarters for the rebuilding process in Lebanon. Since the bombing ended in August 2006, Hezbollah officials have been meeting with families and merchants to register losses and coordinate compensation.

According to Dr. Bilal Naim, the chief of Hezbollah's reconstruction effort, more than 5,000 housing units in the Dahiya suburb were destroyed and 17,000 more were damaged. Twenty schools were bombed and three were completely leveled. Entire apartment blocks were flattened under massive Israeli bombardment.

Hezbollah has built an ever-expanding popular base in Lebanon, both through its effective use of armed struggle and, arguably more importantly, through its social and political apparatus. The aftermath of last summer's war has further entrenched many of the very conditions that precipitated Hezbollah's rise in the first place, including a growing capacity for the resistance movement to deliver public services that the corrupt and increasingly unpopular government cannot, or will not, deliver.



ABOVE, LEFT: CHARACTERIZED BY EXTREMELY high-density apartment blocks, the Dayiha is a crowded Shia slum on the edge of Beirut. It is the popular and political hub of Hezbollah's operations. Although no rockets were fired from the area, it was comprehensively devastated by Israeli bombardment. Of the more than 1300 people killed throughout Lebanon during the war, 110 were in the Dahiya.

The United Nations estimates that some 15,000 houses and 900 businesses in Beirut and southern Lebanon were destroyed in the 34-day war. More than one million people, mostly in the south, were driven from their homes.

According to the Israeli government, 39 Israeli civilians were killed by Hezbollah rockets and another 117 IDF soldiers died, most of them in ground battles inside Lebanon.

The war ended with a UN-brokered ceasefire in August. With Hezbollah claiming victory, many in Lebanon and elsewhere saw this as the second significant defeat of the Israeli army — the first being Israel's withdrawal from South Lebanon in 2000 after two decades of military occupation. For its part, Israel's political and military establishment implicitly acknowledged defeat by forcing the resignation of influential IDF Chief of Staff Dan Halutz. More than three dozen official investigations into "what went wrong" in Lebanon have since been launched by Israel.

ABOVE, CENTRE: A BILLBOARD MEMORIAL in Qana pays tribute to the victims of the "second Qana massacre"—29 civilians, mostly children, killed by Israeli warplanes on July 30, 2006. The first Qana massacre was the 1996 killing by Israeli drones of 106 Lebanese civilians taking refuge in a UN shelter. The two sites are only a few hundred feet apart in this small farming village. Canadian MP Michael Ignatieff responded to the massacre by telling the *Toronto Star*: "This is the nature of the war that's going on . . . This is the kind of dirty war you're in when you have to do this and I'm not losing sleep about that."

ABOVE, RIGHT: ON DECEMBER 10, 2006, an estimated one and a half million people took to the streets of Beirut — this in a country with a population of less than four million.

Led by Hezbollah but bolstered by a broadly based opposition to the Western-backed government of Fuad Siniora, open-ended and unprecedented popular protests first broke out earlier that month. Accusing Prime Minister Siniora of collaboration with Israel and the US during the war as well as driving the country into more than USD \$45 billion in debt through its neo-liberal restructuring, the protestors called for the overthrow of the government. Hezbollah tempered the popular demand, calling instead for greater Hezbollah representation in cabinet and a "blocking minority" on key policy votes.

Wrote one veteran reporter of the December 10 protest, "As a Reuters correspondent, I have covered countless demonstrations in numerous countries, from small-scale sit-ins to anti-globalisation riots, from rallies against war to union shutdowns. But Sunday's event was perhaps the most vibrant, colourful and animated mass mobilisation I have yet seen. Banging drums, whirling flags, chanting slogans, Hezbollah's army of supporters streamed into Beirut for hours on end, emptying villages and city slums recently devastated by Israeli jets in a 34-day war that targeted Shi'ite strongholds. . . . Whatever their faith or faction, almost every protester clutched at least one red and white Lebanese flag, emblazoned with the national symbol of the green cedar tree—never has the journalistic cliché of a forest of flags rung more true" (Crispian Balmer).

In the two decades since the popular movement was established following the 1982 invasion and occupation of Lebanon, Hezbollah has transformed itself from a strictly guerrilla army fighting Israel's occupation into Lebanon's largest and most popular political organization.

RIGHT: A FIRST AID kit is found amid the rubble of the United Nations observation post in Khiam. The post's heavily reinforced bomb shelter was bombed by Israeli warplanes and pounded by Israeli artillery on July 25, killing Canadian Forces Major Paeta Hess-von Kruedener and three other unarmed UN observers.

The UN post came under massive bombardment as the observers repeatedly announced their position to the Israel Defense Forces. In an open letter published days before his death, Major Hess-von Kruedener wrote that the Israeli air force was attacking the area of the UN post with an operational intensity he described as "very high and continuous." The officer wrote: "We have on a daily basis had numerous occasions where our position has come under direct or indirect fire from both artillery and aerial bombing. The closest artillery has landed within 2 metres of our position and the closest 1000 lb aerial bomb has landed 100 metres from our patrol base."

The day of their deaths, the UN soldiers were under attack for more than six hours. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, "After the attack, the UN was adamant the outpost had repeatedly called IDF liaison officers to demand they halt an intense barrage, which allegedly fell very close to their position 14 times before the fatal air strike occurred."

The UN post at Khiam had been operational for more than thirty years.



BELOW: THIS UNEXPLODED BOMBLET, roughly the size of a pop can, lies in the garden of a family's home in Bint Jbail, marked by two rocks and a white stick. The UN estimates that 40 percent of the cluster bomb bomblets that were dropped on Lebanon failed to detonate; these unexploded bomblets now blanket South Lebanon. The cluster bombs — designed for use as an anti-tank weapon — rained down on heavily populated civilian neighbourhoods, farmers' fields and school yards, and now lie buried in the rubble of people's destroyed homes. Israel has ignored repeated UN requests for strike data detailing the placement of the bomb strikes, which would enable authorities to cordon off and deactivate the bomblets.

Since the ceasefire went into effect in August 2006, there have been more than 180 Lebanese casualties from the cluster bombs, including 30 killed. The United Nations Mine Action Coordination Centre-South Lebanon, the agency tasked with clearing the cluster bombs, estimates that more than 2.8 million cluster bomblets were released in South Lebanon. The UN agency describes Israel's use of cluster munitions as "extensive and unprecedented," far beyond anything seen in US and NATO operations in the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan or Iraq, creating "undeclared minefields" throughout South Lebanon that may take "decades" to fully recover.



Speaking on the issue, the head of an Israeli army rocket unit testified to a parliamentary committee that: "What we did was insane and monstrous. We covered entire towns in cluster bombs." The commander said that the orders were to "flood" South Lebanon. The overwhelming majority of the cluster bombs were launched in the final hours before the ceasefire went into effect in August 2006. Israeli parliamentarian Ran Cohen called the actions an "indescribable crime" that "suggests an absolute loss of control and hysteria." 

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