Dispatches from the Middle East: WILPF women on the ground.

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Last summer, WILPF activists from the Israel, Lebanon, and U.S. sections--both residents and citizen diplomats--bore witness to life on the ground before and during the war between Israel and Lebanon. Following are excerpts from their reports.

PREWAR LEBANON, MAY 2006

From Kate Zaidan, program coordinator, U.S. WILPF

I journeyed to Lebanon for both political and personal reasons, though after spending time with family, friends, and colleagues, I've come to understand that for residents of countries that have endured occupation and war, there is very little difference between the two.

I was to attend a conference on Palestinian Refugees and the Right to Return. Unfortunately, it was cancelled at the last minute. As a result I was able to spend more time with the Lebanese section of WILPF and one of the emerging YWILPF (Young WILPF) branches in the city of Bhamdoum.

Samira Khoury, vice president of WILPF International, and I had originally planned to visit the Palestinian refugee camps in the south of Lebanon, but on the appointed day the Israelis began bombing the border. Samira told me this was a common occurrence, the daily reality for the people there, and I was struck by how little we hear about these incursions in the U.S. media. So instead, she escorted me to various convergence spaces of Lebanese civil society, where I got a small taste of Lebanese political activism.

The women's movement in Lebanon is served by the Lebanese Council of Women, an umbrella organization of which WILPF is a member. We spent the day engaged with other members of this movement, including a visit to the headquarters of the Association for the Development of Palestinian Camps, whose mission is to improve refugees' living conditions through cultural, educational, and economic development, primarily through income generated by the sale of Palestinian hand embroidery. I was able to purchase some of this beautiful work for souvenirs and to show my support. We also met with the Arab Women's Solidarity Project and I toured a newly-acquired space that houses their tutoring program for young Palestinians in Lebanon, created in conjunction with a labor organization to prevent youth from dropping out of the inadequate schools in the refugee camps and being forced into child labor.

A highlight of my trip was the Village Welfare Society's Annual Cocoon-Picking Festival. The society, an economic development and cultural heritage association, is another WILPF sister organization started by Beirut branch founder Anissa Najar. There we picked silkworm cocoons to spin silk, a vital part of Lebanese history and a symbol of early resistance to the Ottoman Empire. The efforts of this small village in the mountains to retain its cultural identity and use it as a means to develop economically was an incredibly profound experience for me, as I struggle to retain my own sense of cultural identity. This celebration culminated in a feast of traditional Lebanese food prepared by the women of the village of Darkoucheeh-Chouf. We shared an amazing meal that included fresh manaeesh (fresh bread with herbs and cheese) as a community of women and activists.

LEBANON IN WARTIME

Messages sent in July and August

From Shirine ElJurdi, member of WILPF Lebanon

The Lebanese people feel left out by the world that is turning a blind eye on the savagery of the Israeli state. The numerous civilian victims of the Israeli operations are increasing by the hour. The viciousness of the attacks has attained terrifying levels where a child has been cut in three while another was half burned. The Israeli war machine is destroying not only our lives but the foundations that could help the civilians survive beyond their massacre.

From Noura and Rayya Shaar, YWILPF branch, Bhamdoum

We are still suffering from the extreme attacks, all bridges that link the cities and villages are currently closed, even communications through cell phones. Each and every bombing is killing and injuring lots of children and innocent people. All high schools at Mount-Lebanon are currently jammed with families that escaped from South Beyrouth and South Lebanon. We are helping families to find shelter, food, and cloth[ing]. Please, try your best to raise your voice to all nations for "No violence, and an immediate stop to the attack."

From Roula Zoubiane, WILPF Lebanon

The situation is very dangerous in Lebanon, this beautiful country which has always sought to live in peace and today faces a total and bloody war where the victims are mainly civilians. Israel is destroying our infrastructure, the airport, bridges, roads, electricity, and water facilities, all of which the Lebanese people have worked very hard to rebuild after 17 years of civil war and almost 30 years of Syrian presence and interference in our internal affairs. Now, all of a sudden we are in the eye of the storm again. We keep the faith intact. I hear bombardment. I have to go.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

From Dispatches from the Middle East: Letters from WILPF Lebanese Sisters and International WILPF's Urgent Updates on the Middle East Crisis.

Residential areas in Beirut have been totally destroyed due to the heavy bombardments launched by Israeli aircraft in South Lebanon, where dozens of villages are under systematic bombardment, lacking food, milk for children, and medicine, while the hospitals--some of which have been hit--do not have enough medical equipment to meet the numerous needs of the injured civilians. To tell you the truth, not one military member of Hezbollah has been reported missing in action nor killed; only civilians are falling like autumn leaves: 200 people killed, among them numerous children, and more than 350 injured.

In the southern third of the country (South Lebanon), usually a half-hour bus ride from Beirut, now takes hours to travel in either direction because vehicles can not get through. Instead, people are shuttled from one giant crater to the next, where they walk across debris-strewn holes in the ground or wade though rivers once spanned by wrecked bridges to reach another taxi--if they manage to find one--or mini-bus ready to take them to the next impasse. Throughout the risky journey, their vehicles are subject to Israeli attacks; so many people prefer to stay home and try to cope with the situation. But a considerable number are subsequently convinced to run the gauntlet when the Israeli military warns them that they have two or three hours to leave their villages. On several occasions, such warnings have been followed less than one hour later by air or artillery strikes on civilian vehicles leaving the village. Dozens of civilians have been killed in their own homes, with and without warnings beforehand.

Lebanon has approximately 3.5 million people. On a per-capita basis, as of Wednesday, July 21, 2006, the rough equivalent of 9/11 has happened every day here for ten days. Furthermore, Israel is using banned weaponry in its war on Lebanon: For instance, Lebanon's main Southern town of Nabatieh was attacked with phosphorus bombs, which caused fires in the surrounding fields. Israeli air strikes have ravaged Beirut's southern suburbs and show no sign of ending. The scene included the usual debris of twisted metal, shattered glass, and chunks of cement that follow bomb and rocket blasts, along with personal items, including abandoned toys, scorched mattresses, and dusty books and photos. Dozen of buildings were completely demolished in Haret Hreik and in Bir al-Abed in the southern suburbs, where 20,000 people formerly resided.

Read more at www.wilpf.org/campaigns/WCUSP/articles/lebanon\_letters.htm and www.wilpf.int.ch/updates/leb.htm

PREWAR ISRAEL

From the 2006 WILPF Israel Section report

The Israel Section of WILPF has been very busy this past year with everything that has been happening in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The WILPF sisters are active with many related organizations including Machsom Watch, which monitors and reports on the checkpoints set up by the Israeli army inside the occupied territories; Yesh Din ("There is a law"), which helps Palestinians to file complaints and seek justice for damage done to them and their property by Israeli settlers in the Occupied Territories; Women in Black, which aims to end the occupation and promote peace everywhere; Bat Shalom, the Israeli/Palestinian Jerusalem Link for dialogue with many Palestinian women's organizations; Neled, Women for Co-Existence, which sponsors educational speakers on current events; Tandi, or the Democratic Women's Movement, an organization of Jewish and Palestinian Israeli women; and The Coalition of Women for Peace, which comprises all of these organizations, but also functions independently to help organize large actions.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Our members do a lot of humanitarian work--such as teaching English to Palestinian women; helping needy families (we are finding more and more hunger in the Occupied Territories); driving sick children to Israeli hospitals; helping with olive harvesting, and acting as human shields in the face of settler violence. In addition, WILPF sisters have been visiting and supporting Palestinians who have been wounded through the actions of the Israeli army and are hospitalized in Israel.

ISRAEL IN WARTIME

From the 2006 WILPF Israel Section report

Since the beginning of the war in Lebanon, the radical left, to which we feel we belong, has demanded that the two [captured Israeli] soldiers used as a justification for the war be released through negotiations and an exchange of prisoners. (There are many Lebanese prisoners in Israeli prisons.) From the first day, we protested against the brutality of the Israeli incursion into Lebanon; the bombing of the south Lebanese infrastructure, water and electricity and thousands of homes; the bombing of the cities, Tyre and Beirut; the killing of hundreds of Lebanese citizens, causing thousands to become refugees; the Hezbollah aggression against civilians in northern Israel; the shelling of Israeli cities and villages; and the indiscriminate killing of civilians.

The war increased our activity load. There were two to three demonstrations every week! We have been involved in planning, carrying out, and participating in these actions. We stand firmly with all those who demand, "Stop shooting! Sit down and talk!" The only solutions to our problems will come through negotiations. We believe that any discussions of long-term peace agreements must take into consideration economic security for Israelis, Lebanese and Palestinians. Without economic security there is no possibility for a viable and sustainable agreement that can guarantee living without violence in this area.

We believe that any unilateral action--such as the unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, or the proposed Unilateral Convergence plan in the West Bank--is bound for failure. Only a just and honorable agreement between all parties involved can stop this long bloody ordeal and lead us to a new future. We believe it is possible, if Israel will understand it cannot shuffle the cards on its own, and must come to terms with its opponents, whoever they may be.