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Catholic schools in the hands of Shiite militias

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (21.10.2024) -Since 8 October 2023, the date of the first Hezbollah rocket attacks on Israel in support of Palestinian Hamas, Lebanon has recorded more than 2,000 deaths in these Israeli raids, including 1,110 since the shift into open war on 23 September. *"One hundred and twenty-seven children were killed, including 100 in recent days. Of the 890 children injured, 700 were also injured in two weeks,"* specified Christophe Boulierac, spokesperson for Unicef in Lebanon in an article of the daily "La Croix".

Catholic schools occupied

Willy-nilly, many Catholic schools in Lebanon opened their doors to displaced people from areas bombed by the Israeli army, but militias from Hezbollah and Amal quickly took possession of certain buildings and were sometimes violent in their relations with the Catholic authorities.

"It was on 23 September, the day before the start of the school year, everything was ready to receive our students," testified André, an executive at a Catholic school in southern Lebanon. *"They knocked on our door, they asked us to open the school to them. Without long discussions, the sisters and the management agreed to welcome them in a part of the premises. But on the next day, they wanted to occupy the entire school. The sisters were not in favor of it and so they did it by force. »*

They occupied all the classrooms and laboratories. They intimidated and threatened staff who opposed them and even targeted recalcitrants. Hundreds of families rushed into the breach opened by these men, among them Shiites from Amal and Hezbollah. The nuns no longer have any authority over their school. They even gave up the entrance key to one of their new guards.

"We are happy to welcome all those who come to find refuge with us," one of them told to a French press correspondent, *"but it is difficult, because our school is not adapted for this and they were very violent at first. »* An occupation that does not speak its name, with worrying consequences for the school. *"We can no longer teach and this firstly penalizes our students. Economically, we are deprived of tuition fees and so we are unable to pay the salaries of teachers, there are still around a hundred of them. Nor can we cover all operating expenses. »*

"We try not to think too much about them in order to continue our life. As we do not want to think that we could become a target for Israel because of their presence," explains another nun to the French journalist.

Welcome or unwelcome?

In the Saint-Sauveur monastery southeast of Beirut, founded in 1683, more than 90 families found refuge in its adjoining school, the Saint-Sauveur college.

"We had to improvise, but I think the displaced people are safe within our walls," said Father Superior Antoine Dip. *"They come from Tire but also from the surrounding areas, such as the village of Joun, targeted by Israel."*

"We know them, we make sure that there are no militiamen among them," explained the father superior. *"During the Lebanese War in 1985, armed men occupied our buildings, they ransacked the convent and looted our liturgical treasures, our library and our icons. It took us years to get some of them back. We wouldn't want to go through that ordeal again. »*

A few kilometers from Saïda, a convent run by nuns refused to welcome displaced people into its school, for fear of Shiite militiamen: *"We are, in fact, afraid that people who are dangerous to us will slip in or hide among them. »*

In 2006, they welcomed displaced people fleeing the Israeli offensive in southern Lebanon.

"It was a disaster for us. They ended up pillaging the convent, stealing our most precious possessions and our icons," a sister told. This is why they have decided, for the moment, not to open their school to them.

"Religiously, morally, this poses a big problem for us but how can we avoid being infiltrated by militiamen? Our school, our convent would become a target for Israel, which continuously strikes all around us, on the hills and in the valley which surrounds us."

A few days later, they ended up welcoming displaced families into their school...

Evacuation of Christian villages

On 4 October, 27 villages in southern Lebanon near the border with Israel received orders from the Israeli army to evacuate their populations. Among them, Rmeich, Klayaa and Marjeyoun, three villages which had remained essentially away from artillery fire between Hezbollah and Israel for a year. Only Marjeyoun had an extremely minimal Hezbollah presence.

Christians between a rock and a hard place, Israel and Hezbollah

[ACN International](#) (09.10.2024)* - The Archdiocese of Baalbek-Deir El-Ahmar in the Beqaa Valley, eastern Lebanon, is suffering a major humanitarian and security crisis as a result of the daily Israeli bombardment. In an interview with ACN, Mgr Hanna Rahmé describes the Church's solidarity with internally displaced people and the disastrous situation which is leading many to take refuge in Syria.

"Each of the Christian families in the villages around Deir El-Ahmar has welcomed three or four displaced families, that is, between 30 and 60 people!" explains Mgr Hanna Rahmé, the Maronite Archbishop of Baalbek-Deir El-Ahmar in Beqaa, eastern Lebanon, to Aid to the Church in Need (ACN). The Israeli bombardments are targeting strategic zones in the south of his archdiocese, notably the region around Baalbek, which is considered

to contain Hezbollah bases, but at the same time, the strikes are hitting villages where Christians and Muslims co-exist.

Mgr Rahmé, whose archdiocese covers some 27% of the country's surface area and lies in a region containing about 450,000 Shia Muslims, explains that even in the area around the town of Deir El-Ahmar, the bombardments are occurring daily, targeting Hezbollah's economic and military centres situated between five and twenty kilometres from the town.

"We are choked by the number of internally displaced people, but we can't leave them to their fate; we are not Christians just for ourselves, but for everyone," declares Mgr Rahmé. "I spoke on local television, and I said to the people in the zones under bombardment – Christians and Muslims alike – that our homes were open to them. Because Christ said: 'I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was stranger, and you took me in.'" The Muslims are enormously touched by this Christian solidarity, he adds.

According to Mgr Rahmé, around 13,000 people have fled into the areas of the archdiocese where the population is predominantly Catholic. In Deir El-Ahmar, where the episcopal seat is located, and in the surrounding villages, some 2,300 people have been taken in by educational establishments, while 5,000 others have been put up in private homes and 1,500 in ecclesiastical institutions like churches and convents.

According to the archbishop's account, however, many of the internally displaced people have to sleep on the streets of Deir El-Ahmar. A much larger number has even left for northern Lebanon or Syria. [According to figures from the International Organisation of Migration \(IOM\)](#), between 21 September and 3 October, some 235,000 people reached Syria overland, including 82,000 Lebanese and 152,000 Syrians.

Mgr Rahmé's most pressing concern at the moment is getting aid to the internally displaced people and the host families. The latter, already impoverished by the economic crisis, are at the end of their tether. "The NGOs on the scene are helping the displaced people in the schools, but not those welcomed by families or the families themselves. Nobody is helping them," laments the archbishop, adding: "This is why the archdiocese is taking care of them. However, the situation is very critical. We urgently need food aid, mattresses and blankets, and we are very grateful that ACN immediately offered vital aid. Please stay at our side. If we carry this together, we will be able to do great things. May the Lord bless you."

(*) *Original title of ACN: "Crisis in Lebanon: Christians open their doors to thousands fleeing bombardments"*

Israeli airstrike hits Melkite Greek Catholic Church

HRWF (14.10.2024) - On 9 October, a Melkite Greek Catholic church in Derdghaya was [struck](#) by an Israeli missile killing at least eight people. The church, which was sheltering displaced civilians, was completely destroyed, along with a priest's house and a three-story parish building.

According to the Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), the church and two of its adjoining halls used as a refuge in the Melkite Greek Catholic Eparchy of Tyre collapsed in the airstrike.

Another missile hit a priest's house and a three-storey building housing parish offices, completely destroying them.

[ACN](#) has been funding around 200 projects in the country and is in close contact with a number of dioceses and religious congregations to assess what more help is needed.

In the past months, ACN aid has included food parcels for thousands of families and medical help for 1,200 people who have stayed in southern Lebanon despite the dangers.

A short history of the Greek Catholic Church of Dardghaya

The church was built in 1911 under the episcopate of His Excellency Bishop Zalhaf.

In 1978, following the Israeli invasion, the church was bombed, its west wall being destroyed. It was restored by His Excellency Mgr Georges Haddad.

In 1992, the two-story Antichas was demolished due to Israeli bombing, causing extensive damage to the church, including cracks in the dome. His Excellency Mgr Jean Haddad restored the church and rebuilt it with a single floor.

In 2018-2019, the church was renovated by the Samaan family, who equipped it with an iconostasis, icons, tiles, electrical installations, air conditioners, a sound system and a generator. The Antichas and the rooms were faced with stone and equipped.

On 9 October 2024, the church was hit by an Israeli air raid which caused massive destruction, particularly in the church hall.

The number of Dardghiya residents registered to vote is around 1000, while the number of current residents is around 130 people. In the 1980s, the village had around 500 residents.

Lebanese Christians under Hezbollah rule and in the war

Article originally published by L'Oeuvre d'Orient under the title "Lebanon emergency"

L'Oeuvre d'Orient (08.10.2024) - Since Wednesday 18 September, the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel has become particularly acute. The general security and humanitarian situation in Lebanon have become catastrophic: more than 1,000 deaths in a fortnight, 1.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), i.e. 20% of the Lebanese population, in a country that was already hosting 2 million Syrian refugees.

The bombardments in southern Lebanon, the Bekaa and the southern suburbs of Beirut are currently directly threatening the civilian population, who are being forced to flee towards Beirut city centre, leaving everything behind.

Some Christian villages on the border with southern Lebanon are now completely empty, such as the villages of Alma El Chaeb and Debel, which were hit by air strikes that killed 3 people and caused all the inhabitants to flee.

Not far away, a large part of the population is blocked. In the Christian village of Rmeich, which has a population of 6,000, people can no longer leave because they could be targeted by the air strikes and fighting raging in the south. Displaced persons from neighbouring villages, such as Ain Ebel, which had been ordered to evacuate, are also trapped in Rmeich. The headmistress of the Saints Coeurs school in Ain Ebel, one of the 180 displaced people from her village, told us that the whole population is in a state of terror, cut off from the world. The school of the Sisters of the Saints Coeurs has also been hit by a strike in recent days.

The Lebanese hospital sector is already almost saturated to receive those injured by the strikes, and resources are limited. Geitaoui Hospital in Beirut is the only hospital in Lebanon with a burn's unit. With a capacity of 9 beds and already 25 patients, human dilemmas are already arising where the choice of treatment between two new patients will depend on their chance of survival. This hospital receives no aid from international public donors. (1)

The situation is very different from that in 2006 and 2020 after the explosion of the Beirut Port. Lebanese society is fragmented, the network of associations is fragile, and international donors are less mobilised. In addition, with the presence of Hezbollah in the camps and centres for displaced persons, a number of local and international associations and NGOs fear that international organisations will lose their commitment. We are facing family tragedies that are also linked to the accumulation of serious crises that Lebanon is going through.

This war is taking place against a catastrophic backdrop for the country, which has been without a president for two years now and has been going through an unprecedented economic crisis for at least four years.

Concerns

We are particularly concerned about :

- The presence of Shiite militias in Christian and public schools in the center of Beirut, who are threatening displaced persons and the staff and communities running these schools
- The abandonment of foreign domestic workers who are also fleeing the bombardments and who are being refused entry to centers for displaced persons.

1) Schools broken into and occupied by Shiite militiamen

In recent days, several Christian and public schools in Beirut city centre (west Beirut) have been broken into by armed men and militiamen from the Shiite movements Amal and Hezbollah.

L'Oeuvre d'Orient went to the scene to understand the situation and help these schools as best it could.

Men, organised as a militia, arrived day and night in the above-mentioned schools. They broke the locks, gates and doors to let in large numbers of displaced persons fleeing the bombardments in southern Lebanon and southern Beirut.

These violent intrusions into schools led to panic among school staff and religious communities, who were prepared to welcome these displaced families, but in decent and organised conditions and not in a violent manner.

One of the guards at one of these schools was even threatened with abduction and death by these armed men if he did not open the school gate.

Today, these armed militiamen are stationed at the entrances to these schools and check the identities of all those who enter. They prevent people from entering the premises and prevent journalists from taking photographs or visiting the premises.

The sisters and staff who run these schools are no longer free to move around, are not allowed to circulate in their own school and sometimes even in their convent (one of the sisters no longer has access to her room, which is occupied by force) they cannot decide where and under what conditions the displaced persons will be received.

These forced occupations are endangering the displaced persons, the school staff and the host communities:

- The presence of militiamen in these schools represents a threat. The displaced persons and residents of the sites, as well as the surrounding inhabitants, become a target for potential new Israeli bombardments.
- The reception of displaced persons is carried out in a completely disorganised manner, without any safety or hygiene measures. Food and hygiene conditions are deteriorating, giving rise to fears of disease. (one of the occupied schools has only 3 toilets for 900 displaced persons)
- The close proximity of displaced families is exacerbating tensions within the schools and among local residents.

2) Abandonment of foreign women domestic workers

Fleeing the bombings, Lebanese families abandon the foreign domestic workers who work for them. These women are left behind or on the side of the road, without money, passports or shelter.

These women cannot take refuge in the displaced persons centres because most of them do not accept domestic workers and are reserved "in priority for Lebanese citizens". These women have nowhere to go and are living on the streets. These conditions expose them to serious risks of human trafficking.

This week, L'Œuvre d'Orient visited a reception center for displaced domestic workers in Kalaa, above Beirut. The premises belong to the Sisters of Charity and are run by the Incarnate Word community. There are already 70 refugees there - women, children and a few men - mainly from Ethiopia and Sri Lanka. The center is expecting more people to arrive in the next few days.

Calls and Recommendations

L'Œuvre d'Orient:

- Calls for help for the people trapped in the villages in the south who are at the mercy of the bombardments. - Demands the immediate evacuation of the

militiamen and respect for the decisions and status of the schools hosting the displaced persons.

- Calls for a meeting of the Lebanese Parliament to appoint a President of the Republic as soon as possible to lead Lebanon towards the neutrality it needs and to which it is entitled.
 - Calls for the formation of a new government to coordinate international aid.
 - Calls on the Lebanese authorities to make it easier for foreign domestic workers wishing to leave Lebanon to obtain papers, and to open reception centers for all displaced persons without distinction as to ethnic or religious origin.
 - Calls on international donors to respond to this unprecedented humanitarian crisis and not to focus aid solely on international organisations.
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- Calls on international donors to respond to this unprecedented humanitarian crisis and:
 - o Not to focus aid solely on international organisations. DG ECHO launched a €10 million HIP on 30 September for the following organisations only: WHO, IOM, UNHCR, ICRC;
 - o Respect the EU's humanitarian principles: humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, in particular the principle of humanity, which means that a solution must be found to human suffering wherever it occurs, paying particular attention to the most vulnerable populations;
 - o International donors must therefore adapt to the local Lebanese context, where there are many players on the ground welcoming and helping displaced people: associations, public (municipalities), religious (schools, hospitals, centres...), not to mention families;
 - o Thus integrate local players into coordination mechanisms to avoid discrimination and oversights;
 - o Release funds more quickly and simplify traditional aid mechanisms with a constantly changing situation.

These recommendations are in line with those made in a study "carried out by L'Oeuvre d'Orient with a consortium of associations following the explosion in the Port of Beirut in 2020: **"Urgence Beyrouth" collective study.**

- (1) Dans l'unité des grands brûlés de l'hôpital Geitaoui de Beyrouth : « La guerre va être longue, on ne sera pas capables de continuer sans aide » :
https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2024/10/05/dans-l-unite-des-grands-brules-de-l-hopital-geitaoui-de-beyrouth-la-guerre-va-etre-longue-on-ne-sera-pas-capables-de-continuer-sans-aide_6344365_3210.html
- (2) Etude réalisée par L'Oeuvre d'Orient suite à l'explosion du Port de Beyrouth en 2020 :
<https://www.urd.org/fr/projet/etude-collective-urgence-beyrouth/>