

Thousands sleep on the streets as Israel strikes Beirut

AFP – Thousands of residents in Beirut's densely-packed southern suburbs camped out overnight in streets, public squares and makeshift shelters after Israel ordered them out before its jets attacked the Hezbollah stronghold.

"I expected the war to expand, but I thought it would be limited to (military) targets, not civilians, homes, and children," said south Beirut resident Rihab Naseef, 56, who spent the night in a church yard.

AFP photographers saw families spend the night in the open, scenes unheard of in Lebanon's capital since the Iran-backed Hezbollah and Israel last went to war in 2006.

"I didn't even pack any clothes, I never thought we would leave like this and suddenly find ourselves on the streets," Naseef said.

Israeli jets pounded Beirut's south and its outskirts throughout the night, and Beirut woke up to the aftermath of a night at war, smoke billowing from blazes in several places.

– 'What will happen?' –

"I'm anxious and afraid of what may happen. I left my home without knowing where I'm going, what will happen to me, and whether I will return," Naseef said.

Despite a night of intense strikes, the extent of the devastation and the casualty toll was still unclear early Saturday.

Hezbollah's Al-Manar television broadcast footage from southern Beirut that showed flattened buildings, streets

filled with rubble and clouds of smoke and dust above the area known as Dahiyeh.

Israel on Friday said it attacked Hezbollah's south Beirut headquarters and weapons facilities.

Both Israeli and US media reported that Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah was the target, although a source close to the group said he was "fine".

The group has not officially confirmed that he is still alive.

Martyrs' Square, Beirut's main public space, was filled with exhausted and worried families camping out in the open.

"The bombing intensified at night and our house started shaking," said an angry Hala Ezzedine, 55, who slept in the square after fleeing the Burj al-Barajneh neighbourhood in Dahiyeh where strikes took place.

– 'Children's screams' –

"What did the (Lebanese) people do to deserve this?" she asked, adding that her home had been destroyed by Israeli strikes during the 2006 war.

"They want to wage war but what wrong did we do?" she said after nearly a year of cross-border violence between Israel and Hezbollah which says it is acting in support of its ally Hamas in Gaza.

"We don't have to go through what happened in Gaza," Ezzedine said of Israel's campaign against the Hamas-run Palestinian territory that has left more than 41,500 dead, according to the health ministry there.

Israel's military offensive came in response to Hamas's October 7 attack that resulted in the deaths of 1,205 people on Israeli side, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally based on Israeli official figures that include hostages killed

in captivity.

When Ezzedine began to criticise Hezbollah's actions, her husband quickly interrupted.

"We are patient, but we shouldn't be the only ones to pay this price," he said.

Hawra al-Husseini, 21, described a "very difficult night" after fleeing Dahiyeh to sleep in Martyrs' Square with her family.

"Missiles rained down over our home. I will never forget the children's screams," she told AFP.

"We're going back home (in the southern suburbs), but we're scared," she added.

"It's impossible to live in this country any more."

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