

As the 6am ceasefire takes effect... the real war begins

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The real war in Lebanon begins today. The world may believe - and Israel may believe - that the UN ceasefire due to come into effect at 6am today will mark the beginning of the end of the latest dirty war in Lebanon after up to 1,000 Lebanese civilians and more than 30 Israeli civilians have been killed. But the reality is quite different and will suffer no such self-delusion: the Israeli army, reeling under the Hizbollah's onslaught of the past 24 hours, is now facing the harshest guerrilla war in its history. And it is a war they may well lose.

In all, at least 39 - possibly 43 - Israeli soldiers have been killed in the past day as Hizbollah guerrillas, still launching missiles into Israel itself, have fought back against Israel's massive land invasion into Lebanon.

Israeli military authorities talked of "cleaning" and "mopping up" operations by their soldiers south of the Litani river but, to the Lebanese, it seems as if it is the Hizbollah that have been doing the "mopping up". By last night, the Israelis had not even been able to reach the dead crew of a helicopter - shot down on Saturday night - which crashed into a Lebanese valley.

Officially, Israel has now accepted the UN ceasefire that calls for an end to all Israeli offensive military operations and Hizbollah attacks, and the Hizbollah have stated that they will abide by the ceasefire - providing no Israeli troops remain inside Lebanon. But 10,000 Israeli soldiers - the Israelis even suggest 30,000, although no one in Beirut takes that seriously - have now entered the country and every one of them is a Hizbollah target.

From this morning, Hizbollah's operations will be directed solely against the invasion force. And the Israelis cannot afford to lose 40 men a day. Unable to shoot down the Israeli F-16 aircraft that have laid waste to much of Lebanon, the Hizbollah have, for years, prayed and longed and waited for the moment when they could attack the Israeli army on the ground.

Now they are set to put their long-planned campaign into operation. Thousands of their members remain alive and armed in the ruined hill villages of southern Lebanon for just this moment and, only hours after their leader, Sayed Hassan Nasrallah, warned Israel on Saturday that his men were waiting for them on the banks of the Litani river, the Hizbollah sprang their trap, killing more than 20 Israeli soldiers in less than three hours.

Israel itself, according to reports from Washington and New York, had long planned its current campaign against Lebanon - provoked by Hizbollah's crossing of the Israeli frontier, its killing of three soldiers and seizure of two others on 12 July - but the Israelis appear to have taken no account of the guerrilla army's most obvious operational plan: that if they could endure days of air attacks, they would eventually force Israel's army to re-enter Lebanon on the ground and fight them on equal terms.

Hizbollah's laser-guided missiles - Iranian-made, just as most Israeli arms are US-made - appear to

have caused havoc among Israeli troops on Saturday, and their downing of an Israeli helicopter was without precedent in their long war against Israel

In theory, aid convoys will be able to move south today to the thousands of Lebanese Shia trapped in their villages but no one knows whether the Hizbollah will wait for several days - they, like the Israelis, are physically tired - to allow that help to reach the crushed towns.

Atrocities continue across Lebanon, the most recent being the attack on a convoy of cars carrying 600 Christian families from the southern town of Marjayoun. Led by soldiers of the Lebanese army, they trailed north on Saturday up the Bekaa valley only to be assaulted by Israeli aircraft. At least seven were killed, including the wife of the mayor, a Christian woman who was decapitated by a missile that hit her car.

In west Beirut yesterday, the Israeli air force destroyed eight apartment blocks in which six families were living. Twelve civilians were killed in southern Lebanon, including a mother, her children and their housemaid.

An Israeli was killed by Hizballah's continued Katyusha fire across the border. The guerrilla army - "terrorists" to the Israelis and Americans but increasingly heroes across the Muslim world - have many dead to avenge, although their leadership seems less interested in exacting an eye for an eye and far more eager to strike at Israel's army.

At this fatal juncture in Middle East history - and no one should underestimate this moment's importance in the region - the Israeli army appears as impotent to protect its country as the Hizbollah clearly is to protect Lebanon.

But if the ceasefire collapses, as seems certain, neither the Israelis nor the Americans appear to have any plans to escape the consequences. The US saw this war as an opportunity to humble Hizbollah's Iranian and Syrian sponsors but already it seems as if the tables have been turned. The Israeli military appears to be efficient at destroying bridges, power stations, gas stations and apartment blocks - but signally inefficient in crushing the "terrorist" army they swore to liquidate.

"The Lebanese government is our address for every problem or violation of the [ceasefire] agreement," Israel's Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, said yesterday, as if realising the truce would not hold.

And that, of course, provides yet another excuse for Israel to attack the civilian infrastructure of Lebanon.

Far more worrying, however, are the vague terms of the UN Security Council's resolution on the multinational force supposed to occupy land between the Israeli border and the Litani river.

For if the Israelis and the Hizbollah are at war across the south over the coming weeks, what country will dare send its troops into the jungle that southern Lebanon will have become?

Tragically, and fatally for all involved, the real Lebanon war does indeed begin today.

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