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FROM THE FRONTLINES: Lebanon — the morning after

By Fatima Bhutto

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THIS morning Israel bombed Beirut's International Airport. The east and west runways have been destroyed. Five bridges were obliterated. Over 35 civilians, including 10 children, died in the attack. Israeli warships are stationed at the coast. Half an hour ago, the sounds of bombs falling from the sky could be heard in the Northern-most part of the country. Meanwhile, the White House has condemned the "Lebanese aggression" and created a new trifecta of evil — Lebanon, Syria, and Iran. Nothing has been said of the Shebaa farms, still occupied by Israel. Nothing has been said of the 10,000 prisoners languishing in Israeli jails, the most famous prisoner, Samir Qintar, who is nicknamed "the dean" of Israeli prisons, having spent 27 years behind bars. Nor has anything been said of Israel's continued belligerence against the people of Lebanon, dating back over two decades. So let me say it.

It is unusual for me to be here in this position. While I grew up in the Middle East, I am Pakistani and that will always be my home. But I identify with this struggle. This sense of solidarity does not come from passports or borders. We are Asians. At the end of the day, I find my place with the people of the developing world. We're derogatorily called the "Third World" — the end of the line, the last stop, third place. When I was at the School of Oriental and African Studies, they called us the South and them the North. Call it what you may, but know that this geography includes the people of Bolivia onwards to those in Western Africa and further to include the people Pakistan. Today it could be Lebanon struggling against war and injustice. Tomorrow, it could be Iran and Venezuela.

Violence, perhaps not always of this scope but with equally devastating intent and results, is happening in our own country, in Balochistan, in the Kashmir valley, in the tribal North. It is important that we see this as our own, that we see what is happening as universal, not local. It is not about religion, not in Lebanon or Iraq or Afghanistan. It is about the people and their sovereign right to protect their land from occupation and to resist the imposition of humiliating conditions on their fellow citizens by foreign powers.

In Beirut today families lined up to fill their cars with petrol, should they have to flee their homes. The lines at gas stations all over the city had a minimum one-hour waiting period. The Lebanese people have seen war before, they are not especially afraid. While Israel vacillates between air strikes and an all out invasion, the Lebanese are prepared. Syed Hasan Nasrallah, the General Secretary of Hezbollah, announced in a press conference that while the Hezbollah do not want war and are ready to negotiate

— their 9,000 prisoners for Israel's three — they are ready to "confront Israel to the maximum", should the Jewish state escalates its attacks. He spoke of the Lebanese, of Arabs, not of religions, but of people. Citing international and legal documents and asserting the Lebanese people's right to resistance, Nasrallah proclaimed that Israeli leaders were "delusional" if they thought they could retrieve their soldiers without swapping them for Lebanese and Arab prisoners: "What do they want us to do? Hand over the soldiers and apologise? What kind of world are they living in?"

The response to Israel's Lieutenant General Dan Halutz, who threatened to "turn back the clock on Lebanon by 20 years" was met with fierce reactions. Hezbollah warned Israel that its forces were in for a surprise, stressing that today's Lebanon — its people, its morale and its capabilities — was different from the Lebanon 20 years ago. Eva, a Palestinian Christian evicted from Akre in 1948 and settled in Beirut, told me that while "there is no justice, there is power. Let's show them that we're here, that we're not afraid. This is our country and we're prepared to defend it". Protesters, young men and women, including students from the American University of Beirut, have been gathering in the Martyrs Square in Beirut for a week now to show their solidarity with the people of Gaza and to condemn Israel's aggression against unarmed civilians.

Many, however, are weary. Elham, a housewife in the northern city of Tripoli, said of the Israeli assault: "This is the same as always. They hit a few places, make some noise, nothing changes and they leave." Apathy, she said, was a natural reaction since "all the politicians are sleeping. Where are they?" Indeed, one feels like it is Hezbollah calling the shots here. The Premier Fouad Simiora's response this morning was like a guilty child's denial — I wasn't here! I didn't know! I didn't do it! It wasn't me! Hezbollah, on the other hand, "is ready" whatever the Israelis decide. For peace, they are ready to come to the table. For war, they are prepared to fight.

Reactions to Hezbollah's defiant stance and their continuing operations against Israel seem to be somewhat disparate amongst the Lebanese population. While sweets were handed out in central Beirut upon the capture of the two Israeli soldiers, the elite of the country seem reluctant to partake in any talk of Hezbollah's daring. Their shops will close, their bank accounts in Switzerland will seem even farther away without a functioning airport (which will be up and running again in 48 hours), and their summer chalets on the coast will no longer be open to them during these last weeks of summer.

While generalisations tend to be the mode of reportage by CNN and their ilk, it does seem that the poorer Lebanese, on the other hand, are jubilant. The prisoners at the forefront of this whole imbroglio are their fathers, their uncles, their brothers. Unhappy with their pro-Western government's stand on foreign policy and economic issues, they see this as their way of participating in a political process that directly affects their lives. When your voices can't be heard and your votes don't always count, perhaps your actions do.