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FROM THE FRONTLINES: The absurdities of war

By Fatima Bhutto

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I woke up this morning to the sound of practice Israeli air raids over Tripoli. They were circling the city, the port — where they have already placed a sizable warship — and the roads that lead further north to the Palestinian refugee camp of Badawi. As each day passes, the absurdities of this war continue to boggle the mind.

Indulge me for a moment.

Till now, Israel has bombed Beirut International Airport six times, destroying all the runways and blowing up the fuel tanks. They have hit two medical clinics in Southern Lebanon as well as a power plant in Jiyeh, 25 km from Beirut. The town of Dahiye is utterly destroyed; people are comparing the photographs of Dahiye to the images we see of Baghdad. About 18 bridges have been bombarded, bringing the amount of damage done to Lebanon's infrastructure at approximately \$25 million. Water and Electricity is in scarce supply these days, we had no running water all day. Warships line the coast and yesterday in Sidon the Lebanese army thwarted an IDF attempt to directly invade by sending their soldiers out to claim Lebanese soil. Local news channels are now saying that Israel is dropping phosphorous bombs over the civilian population. It isn't too hard to believe, they did it in 1982. How is it then that Israel is being lauded as "agents of peace" by George W Bush? Of course, the question is rhetorical. That man will say almost anything. My uncle sighed when he heard Bush talking on CNN and said, shaking his head, "That man doesn't have the sense that God gave a peanut." America vetoed a resolution at the United Nations yesterday that would have called Israel to halt its barbaric Gaza offensive; the "agents of peace" obviously have a lot more work to do. But it's all kosher, I'm sure, especially considering how Israel has propagated its peaceful intents for the last 58 years.

While the Western press described the excruciating suffering caused in Israel by the death of one of its civilians and bemoaned the 43 wounded, suffering "mostly from shock" (I kid you not), the Lebanese dead, including several children, are left to a quiet grave. Nearly eighty-five people are dead, all civilians except for two soldiers and close to 200 have been wounded.

Beyond the absurd, there is the ridiculous. Lebanon has been rendered completely landlocked. There is no way out by air or by sea and now the roads to Damascus have been bombarded. Although, bargaining for a way into Damascus and out of Lebanon was almost farcical to begin with. "It's like the stock market," a taxi driver told my

mother, Ghinwa, late last evening. "Right now, the price to get there is \$500. Call me at 6 am tomorrow for an update." A friend from Beirut just called to tell me that the asking price now stands at \$750.

Reporters from all major Arab networks are wearing black or similar sombre colours as they cover the latest developments from the front, yet the reporter from Al Hurra — the American-sponsored channel — stands atop a hill overlooking the burning Beirut, wearing no less than a shimmery white peasant blouse, embroidered with pink and blue flowers. Is that meant to offend? I don't know, but it certainly does not look appropriate.

Last night, after the news of a Hezbollah retaliatory attack, my family and I were watching Al Jazeera in the living room. We heard noises coming from outside but they seemed far away. As the noises grew closer and closer, we began to worry and drove ourselves into a frenzy of what the noise might be. "Israeli tanks have been sent into Tripoli," speculated one aunt. "No, no, it must be the Hezbollah moving arms," guessed another. "But isn't that beeping noise the air raid siren?" asked a third. I felt the moment upon me. I volunteered to be the brave one sent out for reconnaissance. My brother, Zulfikar, wanted to come with me, "Stay inside," I told him. "This is war, it could be dangerous." He rolled his eyes at me. Rightly so, as it turned out. The noise was coming from the garbage collectors out doing their usual rounds. Garbage trucks and nothing more. I could barely maintain any sense of my previous bravado as I had to slink back into the house with the news.

But back to the serious now: Let us return to the situation at hand. A professor of mine used to say that the tanks don't need to be rolling on the streets anymore, because they're already rolling in the mind. Nowhere is this more true than among Lebanon's affluent. This morning the manager of a large grocery store, frequented by my grandparents in Tripoli, woefully wished Hezbollah and the Palestinian resistance would give up responding to Israel's increasingly brutal attacks. "Why don't they just stop?" He complained, "We're only making Israel angrier." And angrier still I hope. While there is no debate whether Israel has the right to protect itself against any and all threats against it, there have been a volley of voices demanding that Lebanon cease and desist their resistance. As Israel has the right to defend what it claims is their home, so does Lebanon.

Syed Hasan Nasrallah warned last night "Our homes will not be the only ones to be destroyed, our children will not be the only ones to die, those days are over". Moments later, through the same recorded message, he directed those who could see the sea facing Beirut to look out at the smoke billowing from an Israeli warship that Hezbollah had just hit. The sense of theatre was astounding. As Nasrallah declares that the very Israeli warship that has been pounding people's homes and laying waste to the city's infrastructure is burning in the middle of the sea, only then do you realise that that smell, that noise just minutes earlier, is what he is referring you, the audience, to. It's like reality TV, but better.

The streets of Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq, and Palestine were the sites of demonstrations

against Israel's siege as the people rallied to show solidarity with Lebanon. Italy, France and Russia called Israel's actions "disproportionate" and Prime Minister Zapatero of Spain warned Israel that "it was making a mistake". The only question now is where are the other leaders? When will we hear them? Why are they so silent?