

Who'll rebuild Baalbeck ruins?

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TRIPOLI, Lebanon: Every evening my grandmother, Teta Kafia, turns on her small handheld radio to BBC's Arabic station and listens to the news. Today I sat with her and listened. The ancient city of Baalbeck is being ferociously bombarded by the IDF. The ruins at Baalbeck are so old that no one is quite sure who built them. It couldn't have been the Greeks, or the Romans - the ruins of Baalbeck predate them. But like the Gardens of Babylon and the ancient libraries of Baghdad, they could all be gone tomorrow, another casualty of Israel's aggression.

We listened to transcripts of Hasan Nasrallah's interview on Al Jazeera. The secretary-general of Hezbollah spoke of two Palestinian children who were injured by a Hezbollah rocket fired into Israel, "I am responsible for them. We will support them, their treatment, their shelter, their food and their clothing is now our responsibility. We won't fail them". He spoke to the citizens of Dahiye, the southern suburb of Beirut. "Don't be afraid," he spoke to the men and women whose homes have been decimated and whose neighbourhoods are no more, "Tomorrow, we will rebuild everything that has been destroyed. We will reconstruct everything".

That's what you call responsible resistance.

We listened to the Spanish prime minister, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, speaking out against the Israel assault. "No one should defend themselves with abusive force which does not protect innocent human beings," he said. He was speaking to an audience of young socialists. He was wearing a Palestinian keffayieh around his neck. We listened to Zapatero being called an 'anti-Semite'.

We listened to the Michel Aoun, a Christian MP whose constituency of Achrafieh was hit by helicopter strike two days ago, speak out in support of the resistance led by Hezbollah.

We listened to Condoleezza Rice threatening to visit the region.

'Stay home,' I thought.

We listened to the news of Israel calling up thousands of army reservists. And my heart slowed down. I thought of my friend David in New York. He had served in the army as a young man, serving in Southern Lebanon in the late 90s. When David finished his tour of duty, he joined the peace movement. He protested weekly in Tel Aviv to pressure Israel to withdraw from the South. We took a political theory class together and shared a favorite professor. We spoke so often of Gandhi and of Martin Luther King Jr. and of the power of passive resistance and civil disobedience. He signs his e-mails 'love and peace, David'. I thought of David being on the other side and I wanted to cry.

We listened to newscaster tell us of the 40 air raids the IDF had completed today.

We listened to the arrival of US Marines, back in Lebanon 23 years after their headquarters in Beirut were razed to the ground. They've returned to help evacuate the Americans stranded in Lebanon. There are 57,000 foreigners waiting to get out. I'm sure there are some prepared to stay. Today when I went to pick up lunch for my family I heard a man with an abnormally thick Australian accent sitting on the table nearby where I was waiting. He was talking on a cell phone, gently telling some frantic family member far away that he had decided to stay. At least for a while. "Let's see where this goes," he said, "I'm not ready to leave". I couldn't tell whether he was originally from Lebanon or not. Not that it made any difference, he was Lebanese now.

We listened to the news that the IDF had stopped dropping leaflets over cities like Tyre and Sidon. They used to drop leaflets in 1982, "leave your homes" they would read. "Your city is going to be attacked". They're going to stop with the leaflets. The Hezbollah blew up a container of them as they were falling from the sky earlier in the week. Now the IDF is taking a more technologically sophisticated route - they are leaving pre recorded messages. Your phone rings, you pick up and a voice tells you "leave your homes. Your city is going to be attacked". I wondered what was next -- text messages?

We listened to the reports that garbage collection all over the country has slowed to a halt. Just as it had during the civil war.

We listened to the statement from the increasingly fearless President Emile Lahoud. Phosphorous bombs were being dropped on the southern city of Nabatieh. Phosphorous bombs. It was true; they were using them again, just as they had during the 1982 invasion.

I felt overwhelmed, all this news and no good news. I left Teta to her news and went into the kitchen. After sitting with my brother Zulfikar for a while, I got up and came to the computer to write this entry.

As I typed and neared the end of this piece, Teta came into the living room.

"70," she said. "It's not 40 anymore. They've done 70 air raids today".