

LATEST NEWS # 369, September 14, 2006

The following news concerns Lebanon.

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Bible Society team visits devastated southern Lebanon villages

LEBANON – *Mike Bassous, General Secretary of the Bible Society of Lebanon, describes a relief and evaluation trip to villages on the border with Israel, where displaced inhabitants have been returning to what remains of their homes*

Two weeks into the miraculous cease-fire, the Bible Society team decided to arrange a trip to the villages along Lebanon's southern border. For the past month, we have been involved in a 'Relief and Scriptures' program for the displaced families who had fled north for safety, to whatever temporary shelter they could find, in school compounds across Beirut and North Lebanon.

Now many of them have moved back south, to what is left of their homes and villages. A trip south we made with relief packages earlier proved to be a welcome and effective ministry but we decided it was now time to make a trip all the way to the border in order to evaluate the situation at first hand.

Our main objective was to assess the needs of the returning refugees, distribute relief boxes, visit the churches and encourage the Christians who have returned to their villages after the 34 days of war.

The Bible Society staff met on Tuesday morning, August 29, for morning prayers, a tradition that started when the war broke out. In addition to our weekly worship and prayer meeting on Wednesday morning, this daily gathering for mutual encouragement and support has been a vitamin that has kept us going during difficult times and lifted our team spirit.

After prayers for our safety had been said, we got on with loading the three Bible Society vans and my four-wheel-drive with the 220 packages. Then, with eight members of staff, two in each vehicle, we set off to south Lebanon. On our journey we counted some 30 blown-up bridges and crossed the Zahrani and the Litani rivers using the temporary bridges that the army had built. The drive also took us through Sidon and after two hours we finally arrived in Tyre, the major city closest to the southern border.



Our first stop there was at the Greek-Catholic (Melkite) Diocese of Tyre, where we met Bishop George Baakouni, the representative of this Church in the General Assembly of the Bible Society. He was dressed casually and was in high spirits. He showed us photos of all the destruction that churches, church centres and 180 homes in his diocese had suffered. On his desk was a damaged chalice, a souvenir retrieved from the remains of one church. We asked him about people's needs and the best route by which to reach the villages. Then it was time to move on.



The roads to the villages were unusually quiet and empty. In a few places there were large cracks left by Israeli air strikes. As we headed up the mountains towards the border, we were shocked by the increasing amount of devastation we saw.

Then the relative peace was shattered by a huge explosion. Unsure about what this was, we continued until we came to a Lebanese army checkpoint; it turned out to have been a controlled explosion on an unexploded Israeli bomb carried out by the army. From then on, we heard explosions during most of the rest of our trip.



The first village we reached was Tebnin. There the war had left cars and houses burnt-out. At the Greek-Catholic (Melkite) church some young men greeted us, thrilled that we had come. In this village Christians are a minority.

“We thought the world had forgotten us,” the residents told us. “You are the first charity to visit us since the war started.”

We left 40 packages inside the church building to be distributed to the church families and their neighbours and promised to come back for another visit.

Back on the road, we climbed up the mountain and reached the last UN post before the border. The soldiers on duty ushered us through to a no-man's land, a region under the control of neither the UN nor the Lebanese army. It was like entering a ghost town: empty roads, with the exception of the occasional car, and no network access on our mobile phones ...

We soon reached the town of Ain Ebel, a mainly Christian town close to the Lebanese-Israeli border. Stopping at the local Maronite church, to our surprise we were greeted by Bishop Nabil Chukrallah Hajj, Maronite Bishop of Tyre. We discussed briefly the needs of all the churches in the region, and then, with the help of the local parish priest and a handful of volunteers, we took 50 relief packages into the church basement. The destruction in this Christian village shocked us into the realisation that the devastation had left no one untouched.

The next village, quite close-by, was Debel. We could not find the local priest but instead were directed to the village's 'refugee co-ordinator', who was lodged temporarily in a local school, sharing its facilities with several displaced families. Everyone there was surprised and happy to see us. We left another 50 relief packages at the school and promised to come back with more. The few people left in Debel were sitting around doing nothing; they had no electricity, no fuel, no water, and apparently not even any hope. Our prayer is that they will turn to the Scriptures for the comfort and hope that they lack.

At that point, we had to decide where to distribute the remaining 80 boxes of food, blankets, medicines, colouring books and Scriptures. We decided to head back to the coastal villages close to the border and visit the churches there. Although we did not want to travel for long in this exposed and dangerous area, our only choice was a small country road.

We had only gone a few miles, however, when we found the road cut off by a huge crater, the result of an air strike. Having manoeuvred the four vehicles onto a nearby dirt road, we continued our journey. Three vehicles later managed to get back onto the main road while the fourth remained on the dirt road that ran alongside it nearby.

Both roads seemed dangerous; unexploded bombs lay at the roadsides and as we were, in effect, driving through open fields we felt like easy targets and had the uncomfortable feeling that we were being watched!

A few miles further on, it became clear that the two roads were not going to cross, so rather than become separated from each other, we turned the vehicles round and headed back to Debel. Later, we learned that the dirt road had been opened by the Israeli army as a route for their land invasion; the hard road next to it had been laid with mines and was considered unsafe. We thank God that we decided to turn around!

We headed from Debel to the border village of Rmeish, where we visited the Antonine monastery and provided sisters Gerarde and Georgette with 40 relief packages for the needy families there.

Our last stop was the closest village to the border, where much of the fighting took place, Yaroun. The parish priest, Father Elias Saliba, met us on the outskirts of the village and guided us around roads that were devastated and made all but impassable by piles of rubble from destroyed houses until we reached the church.

After a brief discussion, we noted his directions on how to head back to Tyre and took off, passing through the worst-damaged village in South Lebanon, a stronghold of Hezbollah called Bint Jbeil. Every single house there had been flattened – even the schools, too. We felt overwhelmed by the sheer extent of the destruction and realised that our work in providing some sort of physical and spiritual nourishment will have to be a long-term project.

That night we arrived back at the Bible Society Center, thanking God for his guidance and protection, and praying that our little effort would provide hope and encouragement to the families and towns that we had visited. The reality is that we had a home to return to. Throughout Lebanon, about 25,000 homes have been destroyed, in addition to some 100,000 homes that have suffered partial damage. Tens of thousands of children will not be able to start school on time for the coming academic year. Yet we pray that the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard their hearts and their minds in Christ Jesus. (1,406 words – LEBANON. 14.9.2006)

Photos (Bible Society in Lebanon)(from top to bottom):

LEB06DJ-34: Bible Society in Lebanon vehicles travelling through Bint Jbeil during a trip made in August 2006 to take relief supplies and Scriptures to southern Lebanon. This village was very badly damaged in the conflict between Hezbollah and Israeli forces.

LEB06DJ-35: Gaby Kobrossi, senior distribution promoter for the Bible Society in Lebanon, examines an unexploded bomb during a trip made by the Bible Society in August 2006 to take relief supplies and Scriptures to southern Lebanon.

LEB06DJ-36: Bible Society in Lebanon van stranded on a military road during a trip made by the Bible Society in August 2006 to take relief supplies and Scriptures to southern Lebanon.

LEB06DJ-37: Damaged cars piled up at the side of the road in Tebnin, one of the places visited during a trip made by the Bible Society in Lebanon in August 2006 to take relief supplies and Scriptures to southern Lebanon.

LEB06DJ-38: Greek-Catholic (Melkite) Bishop George Baakouni with a chalice from a church in Tyre damaged during fighting in southern Lebanon between Hezbollah and Israeli forces. Bible Society in Lebanon staff visited the region in August 2006 to take relief supplies and Scriptures.

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