

A Plead for Humanitarian Relief in Lebanon

By: Gary Paul Nabhan

My young cousins in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon wake up with broken glass sparkling in their hair, every window in their homes shattered by missiles that have struck nearby during the night. They are stranded in a small village of Christian and Bedouin shepherders and orchard-keepers. It is miles away from Hezbolleh encampments, but such geographic facts do not lend them much protection these days.

Israeli missiles have hit the two thousand year old Roman ruins on the ridge above the village, causing rock slides that have damaged their homes. The bridges on the main road into the village from Lebanese cities have been destroyed, and the road to Damascus is just as impassable. The few who risk being out on the road come and go from their homes only by having a vehicle that can cross the rocky streambed below a collapsed bridge. They have been cut off from outside sources of food and water for days on end. Their safe passage was first disrupted by missiles, then by Hezbollah maneuvers closer to the cities, and now by the Israeli tanks that have moved north into Baalbeck, a World Heritage Site turned battleground.

I receive an email from one cousin who returned to the city after somehow delivering supplies to our ancestral village. He first tries to cheer me up by writing, "The situation is better except for the sounds of F16s and the

bombs at night..." Then he breaks down and admits that dogs and cats have been seen eating the bodies of dead civilians, those who died in the first wave of escalation some to weeks ago. He assumes that the American media cannot show the reality of what is happening, so he says he will keep the photos to show me one day...

As I close my eyes, not wanting to further imagine this horror, I suddenly remember images of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, when friends living there were just as stranded, just as heart-broken, just as horrified. After Katrina hit the Mississippi Delta last year, our government's emergency services were stalled, succumbing to chaos, leaving many more dead than any of us could have imagined. Some now claim that the real disaster was man-made, tragically shaped by denial, misinterpretation, and procrastination.

In Lebanon and in northern Israel just as in Louisiana, human suffering has been exacerbated by our own government's inaction, in this case, to demand an immediate ceasefire in concert with other members of the U.N. Security Council. Both Democratic and Republican congressmen have acquiesced to letting the Hezbollah militia and Israeli forces fight it out, at the expense of their people, and at the expense of the Holy Lands in which they live. Blood and oil now spill into the Mediterranean, spoiling everything they touch.

Enough is enough. What we call the American Dream has turned into a nightmare if we ourselves undermine the sanctity of the Geneva Convention, then stand by fatalistically as other countries do the same. How many

United Nations outposts will we watch be demolished, how many children buried beneath rubble, how many journalists and doctors are fired upon? On the day that my cousin wrote me his most recent message, two carloads of medical supplies and one ambulance had been hit, killing the injured being transported to the nearest hospital.