



Inter Press Service News Agency

THE STORY UNDERNEATH

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The cost of the war has been estimated at more than 5 billion dollars -- about a quarter of the country's Gross National Income (GNI).

The government has estimated the damage to infrastructure alone in this war at more than 2.5 billion dollars.

Many Lebanese say their businesses have suffered drastically, but hope they can rebuild after this war, as they have in the past.

Forty-year-old Rima, who preferred not to give her last name, owns a chocolate shop in western Beirut's Hamra district. She saw an 80 percent drop in business during the month-long war, but she refused to close.

"You have to give some kind of stability to the people around you -- that no matter what, you keep going on with the business," she said. "But what for, and what price? With all this destruction, and how many times does Lebanon have to pay for that? That's what breaks my heart."

Lebanon had been working hard to rebuild after its 15-year civil war ended in 1990. Much of what came up after that is now ruined.

"We're talking about roads, airports, ports and electricity, schools, all that were involved in the public sector," said Dunia Kabbani, who works at Lebanon's Council of Reconstruction and Development.

Kabbani added that the private sector has also been hit hard.

"Maybe in the next three to six months we have to face more unemployment and maybe the closure of some companies," she said. "And we will have to work hard, not just in terms of building physical reconstruction, but we have to build Lebanese credibility and to give a positive message to the outside world that Lebanon is worth investing in."

Some economists say at least another 2.5 billion dollars has been lost because of a decline in output, loss of tax and customs revenue, losses in the private sector income, and a drop in tourism.

Tourism accounted for around 20 percent of the country's GNI. More than 1.5 million tourists were expected to visit Lebanon this year, but the war ended those plans.

Nizar Alouf, part owner of Hotel Riviera and the Riviera Yacht Club in Beirut, said his business lost at least three million dollars. The hotel remained completely empty throughout the war, and the yacht club hosted only a few locals.

"We lost the season," he said. "We have to start again to build up the clientele, to convince people to come to Lebanon, to enjoy Lebanon." He added: "Frankly speaking we are fed up -- absolutely fed up."

The costs of this war will add to the national debt of nearly 40 billion dollars that the country had amassed in rebuilding after its civil war.

Countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have announced aid packages for Lebanon. Tunisia has called for an emergency summit of Arab leaders, and Sweden has organised a donor conference Aug. 31, which some 60 countries and aid agencies are expected to attend.

The UN Resolution aimed at ending the war has called on the international community to "consider further assistance" to help with the reconstruction of Lebanon.

But Ibrahim Kanan, a Christian member of Lebanon's parliament, says Israel should also be held responsible.

"Who should pay for this?" he asked. "If we are talking sense and legal international law, we believe the aggressor, whoever is the aggressor, should be responsible. Israel is responsible."

The Lebanese government, civil society infrastructure, and its infrastructure was devastated, he added. "So we believe the international community, which didn't act immediately, is also responsible."

Many other effects of the war remain to be seen. Some of the people displaced by the fighting went abroad and may not return - creating the risk of a workforce drain.

But Hilda Asherush, who remained in Beirut throughout the war, said even though she had wanted to leave the country to escape the fighting, she would have come back.

"It's my country here," she said. "Everything is here. I like Lebanon, and I am Lebanese." (FIN/2006)

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