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The Times

July 24, 2006

Fleeing civilian vehicles hit by Israeli missiles

BY NICHOLAS BLANFORD IN TYRE AND NED PARKER IN JERUSALEM

WITH an expression of utmost calm on her blood-masked face, the woman allowed herself to be gently lowered from the minibus into the waiting arms of two Lebanese Red Cross volunteers.



Lebanese Red Cross workers help an injured woman from a minibus hit by a missile near Tyre (Nicholas Blanford)

The rescue workers had extracted her through a jagged hole in the roof of the crumpled bus, created by a missile fired minutes earlier by an Israeli helicopter that had blasted the vehicle off the road. Left behind in the vehicle, slumped over each other and soaked in blood, were the bodies of three people.

The narrow roads that meander through the valleys and undulating chalky hills east of Tyre were a place of terror and death yesterday as Israeli helicopters attacked civilian vehicles fleeing Israel's 11-day onslaught in south Lebanon.

Dr Ahmad Mrowe, director of the Jabal Amel hospital in Tyre, said: "Today is the day of the cars. It has been very bad."

By early evening, the Jabal Amel hospital alone had received 41 wounded, most of them serious, according to hospital sources, all thought to be civilians seeking refuge north of the Litani river after heeding Israeli warnings to leave the area.

The stricken minibus was hit along a road cut into the side of a steep valley beyond Siddiqine village, where Israeli artillery shells exploded in thick, dirty, white plumes of smoke and dust.

One man, his face half torn off by a missile, sat in his seat, his yellowing hand hanging from the window.

Beside him, covered in the dead man's blood, a woman moved slightly back and forth.

"Can you stand?" asked a Red Cross volunteer. The woman mumbled an incoherent response.

A few yards away, some of the survivors lay on the ground, moaning and crying.

Red Cross medics said that 19 people had been in the vehicle, all of them from Tiri, a small village 7 miles to the south-east.

Abbas Shayter, 12, said: "Someone came for us and we drove with other cars out of the village.

"We were trying to keep up with the others when we were hit."

He said his grandmother, uncle and another man had been killed.

An officer with the UN peacekeeping force in south Lebanon said that the Israelis had told them they would not hinder cars travelling north on the main

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roads.

But the evidence yesterday suggested that cars were being attacked regardless of their occupants and direction of travel.

Hezbollah rockets claimed the lives of two people and wounded 20 others in the Israeli city of Haifa. Another 50 people were injured in rocket attacks in at least 10 other towns across northern Israel.

The attacks came as Israeli troops battled to clear a mile-wide strip along the northern border, encountering resistance from Hezbollah forces in bunkers.

The Israeli Army went to the assistance of an Italian UN observer, Captain Roberto Punzo, who was hit by Hezbollah fire during the clashes. He was taken to hospital in Israel with serious injuries.

A Lebanese photographer, Loyal Najib, was killed during another clash in the southern village of Qana.



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