

News Front Page



- Africa
- Americas
- Asia-Pacific
- Europe
- Middle East
- South Asia
- UK
- England
- Northern Ireland
- Scotland
- Wales
- UK Politics
- Education
- Magazine
- Business
- Health
- Science/Nature
- Technology
- Entertainment
-
- Have Your Say
- In Pictures
- Country Profiles
- In Depth
- Programmes

- RELATED BBC SITES
- SPORT
 - WEATHER
 - ON THIS DAY
 - EDITORS' BLOG

Last Updated: Saturday, 15 July 2006, 21:49 GMT 22:49 UK

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Royal Navy ships head for Lebanon

Defence Secretary Des Browne has given orders for HMS Illustrious and HMS Bulwark to "make ready" for operations off Lebanon.



HMS Illustrious is currently in Gibraltar

The pair will depart as soon as necessary, possibly within 24 hours.

No order for evacuating UK citizens has yet been given, but ministers and defence staff are considering a plan to evacuate those trapped in Lebanon.

It comes as Israel has stepped up its strikes in Lebanon after Hezbollah militants seized two Israeli soldiers.

'Contingency planning'

HMS Illustrious is currently in Gibraltar and HMS Bulwark is close to Barcelona in Spain.

The decision whether to proceed with an evacuation plan has not yet been taken and no orders have been given.

Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett said British nationals in Lebanon should make sure the embassy knows of them, to stay put, keep a low profile and take embassy advice as it becomes available.

“ It is quite unnerving when you hear the planes and bombs coming ”

Karen Wild, Sheffield student

[Mid-East crisis map](#)
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A Foreign Office spokesman added: "We are also advising British nationals to get ready for departure at short notice if the situation changes including by having travel documents in order."

But a British student in Lebanon, Natalya Adams, told BBC Radio Five Live she was having trouble getting help from the British embassy, unlike American students who had been send texts from their embassy.

"We've not heard anything and the only news I'm getting is from my mum... bugging them from London," she said.

"She's able to get through to the London number and she's the one who's giving me the information on what the British embassy are saying."

Meetings on the evacuation plan are taking place at the Ministry of Defence.

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A Briton in Beirut who doubts the ships could help her leave

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An MoD spokeswoman said the two ships had been given "no specific tasking", but added: "As you would expect we are monitoring the situation closely and are engaging in prudent contingency planning."

"As part of this HMS Illustrious and HMS Bulwark will shortly head towards the region," she said.

'Planes and bombs'

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has said the offensive against Lebanese targets will continue until Hezbollah releases the soldiers and stops firing rockets at Israel.

British student Karen Wild from Sheffield, who is in the Lebanese capital, Beirut, told BBC News 24 that she did "not feel safe".

She said she had been able to speak to the British embassy in Beirut who had told her to "stay put, stay inside" for the time being.

"It is quite unnerving when you hear the planes and bombs coming," said the student of Arabic.

“ I don't know how they (Navy ships) are going to get here as the port has been bombed ”

Angela Quatermaine, Oxford student

Ms Wild said fellow Canadian, Spanish and Italian students had been evacuated in the past few days.

There are several thousand Britons in Beirut. One who has got out of the city is student Angela Quatermaine, from Oxford.

She told the BBC: "The Lebanese have been so kind and friendly... they have been wonderful getting us out of Beirut."

Referring to the news that the two Royal Navy vessels were on standby, she said: "I don't know how they are going to get here as the port has been bombed... we'll believe it when we see it."

Marines aboard

BBC defence correspondent Paul Wood has said that 24 hours to get ready for sailing would be considered a "short turnaround" for the two ships.

He said that damage to the airport and port in Beirut meant it would be "difficult to get in".

"Any evacuation would be carried out in concert with other countries, led by the US," he added.

Mr Wood said HMS Bullwark had a contingent of 500 marines, which could be used to make beaches safe in the event of any evacuation.

HMS Illustrious has helicopters and fighter bombers on board, which again could be used to aid any evacuation.

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