Humanitarian corridors are critical for aid

John Zarocostas *Geneva*

Specialist United Nations agencies are mounting a massive relief operation to reach more than 700 000 Lebanese civilians displaced by the escalating conflict and in need of urgent help. Half of the displaced people are children.

An emergency appeal launched on 24 July in Beirut by the UN's top humanitarian official, Jan Egeland, is seeking $149m (£80m; €120m) from donors. The sum includes $32.4m to serve the health needs of 800 000 people over the next three months, $15m for nutrition, and $14m for water and sanitation.

A World Health Organization official said that the entire health infrastructure in the south of Lebanon is destroyed but noted that hospitals in the rest of the country were functioning.

Drugs for chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease were running out, and WHO, along with Lebanese health authorities, had established a list of what was needed and would try to buy them locally or in neighbouring countries.

But as the *BMJ* was going to press on Tuesday UN relief was still being stymied by the ongoing air, sea, and land blockade that is preventing even basic supplies from entering the country—although some shipments have managed to come in by sea.

"We have 500 tonnes of aid sitting on the Syrian-Lebanese border, and we can't get it in by road. We don't have safety guarantees, and we need these from all sides," said a spokesman for the UN Refugee Agency, Ron Redmond.

The issue is being raised "every single day," he said. "It's a very frustrating thing for us."

The crisis was sparked by Hizbollah raids on Israel on 12 July, in which two Israeli soldiers were captured, and by Hizbollah rocket fire into Israel. The Israeli government responded by bombing Hizbollah positions in southern Lebanon, attacking Beirut airport, and launching an air and sea blockade on Lebanon.

Israel attacks Red Cross ambulances

Owen Dyer *London*

The first reports of attacks on Lebanese medical staff emerged last weekend, as Israeli aircraft destroyed two Lebanese Red Cross ambulances that were bringing wounded civilians to the Najm Hospital in Tyre.

Six Red Cross staff were injured in the attack on Sunday night, and three patients with light shrapnel wounds who were being transported sustained critical injuries. Kassem Chalaan, the driver of the first ambulance hit, told the BBC that the second vehicle was struck immediately when it radioed for help. Both vehicles were clearly marked with flashing sirens and spotlights directed on to the Red Cross symbol, Mr Chalaan said.

Lebanon's minister for public health, Mohammed Jawad Khalifa, reported two earlier attacks on ambulances, although these were not Red Cross vehicles. One attack occurred near Burj-el-Shemali. The driver lost an arm, and two passengers were injured. The other took place on the Zahrani bridge, scene of frequent Israeli air strikes. The driver lost both legs.

The health ministry is compiling data on all killed and wounded civilians to present to the United Nations. As the *BMJ* went to press on Tuesday the official count stood at 384 Lebanese dead, including 20 soldiers and 11 Hizbollah guerrillas. A total of 1595 people had been injured.

Dr Khalifa predicted that the country would begin to run out of medical supplies in five days. But the distribution is patchy, and supplies are already running low in some cut-off areas, he said. A hospital pharmacist in Baalbek had called the Lebanese Red Cross in Beirut to report that supplies were low and that drugs for patients with hypertension and diabetes had run out.

In Beirut, 30 patients were reported injured by flying glass after a bomb detonated outside the Sahel General Hospital on Saturday.

A two person team dispatched by Médecins du Monde to the hospital in Tyre reported that they had hoped to send emergency kits by boat from Beirut on Wednesday.

Hizbollah rocket hits hospital

Judy Siegel-Itzkovich *Jerusalem*

The 350 bed Ziv Hospital in the northern Galilee city of Safed was hit by a Hizbollah rocket on 18 July, causing a quarter of its windows to be smashed and wounding eight people, including one doctor. The Israeli health minister, Ya'acov Ben-Yizri, ordered the fortification of all oxygen tanks in northern hospitals, as a direct hit would have disastrous consequences.

As a result of the rocket attacks hospitals have taken in more than 400 wounded Israeli civilians. Hizbollah's rockets, which can fire a distance of up to 100 km, have reached an area stretching from Haifa on the Mediterranean to Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee. An estimated 180 rockets a day are being fired.

In the last two weeks 17 civilians have been killed by rockets and 1490 people have been admitted to hospitals in the north. Of these people 970 were not physically hurt but had anxiety attacks.

Hadas Ziv, executive director of Israel's Physicians for Human Rights, an organisation with 1200 Jewish and Palestinian members, condemned Hizbollah's action but also criticised Israel's reaction.

"The Hizbollah are war criminals," she said. "There is no justification for what the Hizbollah have done: abducting soldiers from Israeli territory without provocation and killing and endangering civilians with missile attacks.

"But I think Israel's military reaction, at least according to massive damage to civilian facilities and to non-combatant residents, was exaggerated and that the army is not doing enough to avoid harm to the infrastructure and civilian population. The current bloody conflict on the northern border between Israel and Hizbollah has resulted in the loss of many innocent lives on both sides and damaged thousands of people. As men and women in the medical field, it is our responsibility to warn against the continuing physical and mental damaged inflicted upon the civilian populations and call for the immediate cessation of violence in our area."

Ahmad Ali, whose legs were amputated at a Beirut hospital after Israeli planes hit Blida, in southern Lebanon (left), and a man in Sieff Hospital in Israel being treated for shock after rocket attacks in Safed