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Fake figures: reports of 10,000 dead and 600,000 homeless false

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Numbers are abstract, but casualties are human. The problem in southern Lebanon has become how to reconcile the abstract with the reality. This problem has been compounded by the cynical use of exaggerated figures for propaganda purposes. Take for example the number of 10,000 dead which has been bandied around since the Israeli forces captured Sidon, the third largest city in Lebanon. Where did this figure come from? It has been variously attributed in press accounts to spokesmen of the United Nations or the International Committee of the Red Cross. However, a check with the Office of the Secretary General of the UN in New York revealed that the UN does not estimate casualties, but relies on the ICRC. On the other hand, an ICRC spokesman in Lebanon, in interviews published in *The Washington Post* and *Baltimore Sun* on Friday, June 25, "heatedly denied that the 10,000 figure came from his office." The only other apparent source for this figure was the Lebanese Police, who estimated that the first ten days of fighting had resulted in 9,583 dead and 16,608 wounded. Apart from the strange exactitude of these figures in a very confusing situation, as Edward Cody noted in *The Washington Post* on June 23, "how the police arrived at that figure since the Israelis still control much of southern Lebanon." So we can dismiss the figure of 10,000 as a figment of someone's imagination; and presumably someone not friendly toward Israel.

Israel attributes the 10,000 figure to the Palestine Liberation Organization. However, civilian casualties have been regrettably "high" in the Israeli action in Lebanon. This has mainly resulted from the PLO's deliberately using civilian emplacements for their forces. The question still arises, what is "high" in this context?

The latest Israeli estimate of civilian casualties in the three main cities captured—Sidon Tyre and Nabatiyeh - is that there were approximately 460 dead. While there has been some confusion as to whether this refers only to Lebanese and not Palestinian civilians, an Israeli spokesman made it clear that they make no distinctions in this respect. However, the figures do not include casualties at the large Palestinian refugee camps outside the cities, nor in the Lebanese countryside. So one must expect the total figure to be higher than this.

While the Lebanese Red Cross estimated 1,000 to 2,000 dead in Sidon alone, the ICRC indicated their only firm figure was 47 dead and 247 wounded in Tyre. This agrees with the Israeli estimate, as indicated by the heading of the article in the *Baltimore Sun* on Friday: "Israel gets backing on toll claim." Strangely, the heading in *The Washington Post* of the same interview with the same ICRC spokesmen had the opposite implication: "Disagreements flare over casualty toll in Lebanon." The facts are the same, only the overall interpretation is opposite. As the ICRC spokesman was quoted in this article, "it would take

weeks or months before any casualty figures could be established.”

Acceptable figures

While Israeli spokesmen might be inclined to underestimate the figures, the well-known Israeli military accuracy, the veracity of their reports of the fighting and their dropping of leaflets warning civilians to flee before attacking these cities, encourage one to accept their numbers. Let us also acknowledge that we expect Jewish soldiers in an Israeli army not to deliberately cause civilian casualties.

Credence for the official Israeli figures comes from an unlikely source, a column by Rowland Evans and Robert Novak in *The Washington Post*, also on Friday, June 25. From Sidon, they report "in the two cities of Tyre and Sidon there is reason to take seriously the Israeli estimate of Lebanese casualties; a total of 250 killed and less than 1,000 wounded." Since this is where the heaviest fighting occurred, yet does not include Palestinian civilian casualties in rural areas, a very rough estimate might be 1,000 dead. That in itself is a terrible toll, and explicitly excludes PLO combatants and the latest Israeli casualties of 214. If it turns out that this estimate of civilian casualties is eventually verified, it might be considered a rather low figure given the ratio of Israeli dead, and the total population of the area.

'Refugees' exceed population

This leads to the question of "refugees" in Southern Lebanon. The ICRC spokesman indicated that a figure 600,000 displaced persons had 'been issued by the Lebanese Red Cross during the first few days of the fighting, and had been relayed by the ICRC.

However, this proved an embarrassment since there are probably

not more than 510,000 residents in the whole of south Lebanon. The current figures issued by the ICRC on June 11 are for a special appeal covering three months and estimate about 250,000 people "affected" during the first month, 100,000 during the second month and 50,000 during the third month. Clearly this word "affected" could cover many situations, but the ICRC anticipated that the situation would improve rapidly as "displaced" persons return to their homes as the fighting spreads north. Also, one must bear in mind that the ICRC admits that it has no accurate means to estimate these figures and that it uses them as an appeal to gather funds.

Given the rapidity with which people are apparently returning to their homes in South Lebanon as the fighting has moved north, in other words, their "displacement" was very temporary - the Israeli estimate of 20,000 currently displaced may not be exaggerated. But, once again it is not clear if this includes Palestinian civilians who are still in South Lebanon.

However, the whole question of "displaced" persons is complex. With fighting still going on around West Beirut, additional mass movements of civilians were occurring in Lebanon. Christian Lebanese, who years ago were forced out of Damour and areas in the south during the Civil War are streaming out of the Christian enclave in the north and heading back home. Lebanese Moslems are leaving the general area of the current fighting around Beirut and Palestinians are also moving toward the north beyond the Israeli lines. One estimate is that there are 10,000 "refugees" around the city of Baalbek. The problem is that these people have probably been counted at least twice.