

Bruno, head of mission in Lebanon, has just returned from a five-day evaluation mission in southern Lebanon. In this region devastated by the recent conflict, unexploded cluster bombs are an omnipresent danger.

“In south Lebanon the main danger is cluster bombs that lay unexploded on some roads. We had to take roads that had already been opened and that were quite safe.

We were able to move quite freely although we often had to check that there was no more combatant left in the areas where we travelled.

I saw scenes of destruction that reminded me of Kashmir (Pakistan) where entire towns had been flattened by last autumn's earthquake. The situation is not the same everywhere, but the needs are enormous. We saw a continuous flow of people returning home in overloaded vehicles with mattresses on the roofs. Everybody finds refuge wherever they can. People are occupying houses that are half-destroyed. Some are living with parents and friends. As the population is in transit, it is difficult to locate and help people. However the solidarity amongst Lebanese people and communities is very strong. It is quite common to see two or three families sharing a house.

People from south Lebanon seem in a hurry to return home, to find their houses even if destroyed and to reoccupy their land. Lebanon is a poor region and unemployment was wreaking havoc before the war. The tobacco harvest was done too late and was subsequently lost. The return of people en masse has also been marked by funerals. We saw collective burials in several villages and collective ceremonies in memory of the “martyrs”. The feeling amongst the population is a mixture of sadness, anger and revenge. If they have not won the war, they don't think they have lost it, to the point that the victory sign is omnipresent. People also appear to be conscious that the hostilities may restart at any moment and that the situation is precarious. The number one problem is water because pumps are not working due to the lack of electricity and petrol.

South Lebanon is heavily polluted by cluster bombs

Our strategy is to support those already working in South Lebanon. We have the chance of working with efficient and motivated Lebanese partner organisations in different areas. We will be working alongside two organisations, Alpa and Samidoun, to start shipping World Food Programme's food stocks to three sites (Tibinin, Ait ech Chaab and Srifa). This is following a needs evaluation conducted by Samidoun that will be in charge of the food distribution and the monitoring of the situation.

We are also planning to support a consortium of 17 Lebanese NGOs experienced in preventing accidents by landmines and unexploded ordnances. The danger of explosive remnants of war is very real. South Lebanon is heavily polluted by cluster bombs. There is a pressing need to clear houses and vehicles. We heard of people who have started to clear landmines themselves, sometimes to the cost of their own lives. Mothers are also guarding remnants of war, which they thought were explosives, wrongly or rightly, to protect their children. Unfortunately Lebanon is a country used to war, and the sense of danger represented by these arms is quite widespread.

We are often frustrated that things aren't going fast enough, for example when the issue is to protect the population from cluster bombs. However things are generally going well and it is comforting to see that the Lebanese civil society is motivated, unified and showing lots of initiative.

Our mission is to support and use the existing skills and capacities in south Lebanon. The biggest difficulty faced by international stakeholders is to avoid complex local political and religious games. Beyond the military conflict, we cannot ignore that we are engaged in a 'battle of image' as well as a battle of reconstruction. Some political and religious groups have social support structures and local representatives working on the ground for the benefit of the people. For international organisations, the margin of manoeuvre is tight and we need to be careful to avoid instrumentalism.”

Bruno
Beirut, 21 August 2006