

# AT LEBANON'S 'GROUND ZERO'

An aid worker's story of braving unexploded ordnances and using taxis to help victims of the Israel-Hezbollah conflict



A FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE: (Above) Mr Kevin Cook at one of the "ground zero" sites in Lebanon. (Top right) Refugee children in a truck. (Bottom right) World Vision International staff delivering aid.

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Mr Kevin Cook, 49, a member of World Vision's Global Rapid Response Team (GRRT), spent a month in the conflict zone helping Lebanese families affected by Israel's recent war with Hezbollah. He tells **NG HUN WEI** ([hunwei@mediacorp.com.sg](mailto:hunwei@mediacorp.com.sg)) about his experience:

HAD we driven our Land Rover forward a few more inches, at least half of it would have been blown off. The unexploded black mortar shell was embedded in the grey of a tarmac road in southern Lebanon, and we only screeched to a stop when our security officer, specifically tasked to look out for these things, spotted it and yelled.

An estimated 20,000 more of such unexploded ordnances (UXOs) littered the area. They had been left behind following the month-long Israeli offensive in July that aimed to ferret out Lebanon-based Hezbollah militias, and inevitably made travelling risky.

The UXOs were just one of the dangers I faced while helping war-battered Lebanese refugees, which numbered a million.

The fighting was still ongoing when I arrived on July 28. I was initially confined to working from an office in the north-east suburbs of Beirut, organising press conferences and updating the international media on the developing humanitarian crisis.

Just 3 to 5km away, missiles pummelled buildings that Israel believed Hezbollah members were hiding in. The blasts were so powerful that they shook the walls of my room and kept me up at night.

## THE DIFFICULT ROUTE TO AID

As a member of the relief organisation World Vision (WV), my brief was to provide the Lebanese refugees with the necessary relief supplies.

However, delivering these supplies was a challenge. There were numerous roadblocks and the Israeli Defense Forces did not clear us for operation in some areas.

Large vehicles could easily become military targets. Sometimes, I had to use passenger cars – often taxis – to deliver

urgently-needed medical supplies.

Navigation was equally difficult. Heavy bombing had turned landmarks into debris and roads into patches of craters. The maps we had were almost useless, adding hours to our travel.

Despite these difficulties, we managed to distribute relief items to nearly 30,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) by early August. They had crammed into churches, mosques, garages and any other buildings still standing. Though it was summer vacation then, many children found themselves back in school as refugees.

Sanitary conditions were poor and all drinking water and food had to be provided by WV and other aid organisations. IDPs I spoke to had only a small foam mattress and some utensils. Many were frustrated; despairing, they blamed Israel and its ally, the United States, for their plight.

Despite having sparked off the war, Hezbollah – a provider of health care and social services to southern Lebanese – largely escaped the brunt of the refugees' anger.

In the hours after the long-awaited United Nations-backed truce on Aug 14, tens of thousands of refugees returned home, anxious about the people and homes they left behind.

There was still sporadic fighting. UXOs were scattered across the country. But the refugees ignored these dangers and moved en masse. Lacking vehicles, many travelled on foot. I saw fathers carrying children on their shoulders, while mothers pushed prams. I was stunned by the scale and speed with which they returned home.

## GETTING TO THE DESTRUCTION

I followed many of them into southern Beirut, the main battleground between Israeli and Hezbollah forces.

Despite having worked in other war-torn countries like Sudan and Liberia, the scale

of destruction here stunned me.

Instead of apartments and shops, there were only their skeletal remains and piles of grey rubble. Walls of buildings had been blown off and I saw a man standing at the edge

of his exposed apartment, gazing at the damage below. Many Lebanese wore paper masks to filter out the dust and odour. This was Beirut's own "ground zero".

It is expected to take at least a year to clear the area and for buildings to be rebuilt to the point when civilians can move back.

Many families pitched tents beside their destroyed homes. They were glad to be back, but could not do much except wait for help.

I later met 45-year-old Achmed Mohamed, the mayor of a Muslim village that was similarly devastated. He and his family of more than 10 were standing outside a small mud-brick house. More than half of their goats and sheep were dead.

He said: "We couldn't wait to come back to our village even though we knew there would be no water, electricity or help for us. The livestock that survived won't give any milk so we have nothing to sell."

As IDPs, Achmed and his family had lived in refugee communities and received WV aid. "Now we need your help again," Mr Achmed told me.

## REBUILDING LEBANON

But it was impossible to provide immediate help to Mr Achmed and others like him. The large trucks needed to carry the necessary supplies could easily run over UXOs.

Getting rid of these hidden explosives became one of our most important challenges, for they do not just make travelling risky.

Dr Alie Jejazi, mayor of another southern village, had two halves of a detonated cluster bomb on his desk when I met him.

"This is a very dangerous environment

world at large

for returning families, especially for children," he said. "There are lots of unexploded cluster munitions here ... the children will find the bombs and play with them."

The bombs reportedly killed 17 Lebanese children in the first week after the ceasefire.

In response, we began marking explosives we spotted with two piles of rock topped with a bright orange flag.

Apart from assisting the families, we also gave out posters and leaflets – designed by the United Nations Children's Fund, or Unicef – warning them of the dangers. Such education was necessary because there were so few bomb disposal personnel in the country.

Once the UXOs were cleared from the major roads, I travelled with WV's first large relief convoy on Aug 24 to Mr Achmed's village and other nearby ones.

The convoy consisted seven six-wheel trucks carrying 51 tonnes of goods and two oil tankers carrying 31,000 litres of diesel. The journey, normally lasting only 90 minutes, took almost five hours as all bridges along the way had been bombed.

With the supply lines in place, I left Lebanon the next day on a nearly empty cruise ship chartered by the UN World Food Programme. I was happy the conflict has ended, but like other relief missions I was on, I left feeling I could have done much more.

These were some of the questions I asked myself: What if I had arrived earlier? What if more supplies were delivered to more people? Could I have further raised awareness of the refugees' plight and got more people to help?

I hope to return to Lebanon some day, but for reasons different from those for this trip. Much of Lebanon is in ruins, but at Beirut's Ground Zero, I remembered seeing clusters of Lebanon's flag sticking out of the rubble. Returning citizens must have planted them. This is a sign of their resilience that I know will see them through the city's rebuilding – barring any further wars.