



PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

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In recent weeks the tragic situation in Lebanon has deteriorated again, with renewed fighting and accompanying injuries and deaths of Lebanese people, including many civilians.

Australia's Lebanese community has naturally been gravely concerned about this situation and I have in recent days met with representatives of the community, both Christian and Muslim. Community and religious leaders have given me at first hand their views on the tragedy, and I have taken the opportunity to outline the Government's position.

After fourteen years of fighting in Lebanon it is clear that violence does not provide an answer to the country's problems; it has failed totally to resolve the basic issues at stake and cannot be expected now to bring the confrontation to a conclusion. The human cost of the violence has been immeasurable and it is clear that only compromise, accommodation and peaceful political reform can now bring the fighting to an end.

Eventually, Lebanon must return to a situation where it fully exercises its sovereignty within its own borders and becomes again, as it used to be, a haven for people of all confessions and beliefs, where all communities have reasonable access to political life and the fruits of economic prosperity.

For such a goal to be achieved it is essential that violence be rejected by all groups within Lebanon and that Lebanon's neighbours play a part in advancing, not spoiling, the process of reconciliation. This will require the withdrawal of the Syrian and Israeli forces.

Until that happens it is essential that foreign forces in Lebanon should not act as participants in the fighting or as instigators of new phases of conflict. Nothing excuses the unleashing of mass violence and carnage in the name of pacification as practiced by Syrian forces in recent weeks. Those actions will not bring Lebanese to the conference table but only entrench the more extreme elements on both sides who have an interest in the final breakdown of all vestiges of the Lebanese state.

My appeal is to Lebanon's leaders and, especially, to the ordinary Lebanese, those who have taken shelter in recent weeks from all this madness in cellars and shelters; those whose voice is silent. My appeal, too, is to the Arab League leaders who have tried in recent weeks to find some way to call a halt to this killing, to continue and redouble their efforts. I have already conveyed to the Arab League, via the Algerian Ambassador in Canberra, Australia's wish to do anything we can to help its attempts to find a basis for a ceasefire and negotiations.

I will also appeal to the United Nations Secretary-General to keep in touch with Arab efforts and lend support to a resolution of the immediate and fundamental causes of the conflict.

My final appeal is to Syria to show restraint and ensure that its forces, for as long as they remain, desist from destructive action against population centres.

I will be visiting a number of European countries and the United States in June and will use any opportunities that arise to help advance international moves towards peace in Lebanon.

In further response to the situation in Lebanon and to the representations made to the Government by Lebanese community groups the Government has also decided to provide a substantial increase in humanitarian aid to Lebanon.

A total amount of \$500,000 will be provided to the International Committee of the Red Cross and to the United Nations for work they are currently doing to assist those Lebanese who are worst affected by the ongoing strife and bloodshed. This money will, of course, be allocated, regardless of any religious or factional boundaries.

The Government will communicate to the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations the views of the Australian Lebanese community on how the money might best be spent.