



ANATOMY OF AN EVACUATION

By Magda Abu-Fadil

Sarasota, Florida, September 1, 2006 --

Irony: I was evacuated from a war zone, had a mercury spill at my daughter Amy's new school in Florida the second week she was there and now face Florida's annual hurricane season one year after the devastating effects of Katrina. They seem to come in threes. As the French say, "jamais deux sans trois."

Irony: In one episode of the war on Lebanon, 29 Lebanese civilians, mostly children, were killed by an Israeli attack on the southern town of Qana, where Jesus Christ is said to have turned water to wine. Mostly Muslim victims of Jewish aggression at the site where the Christian Prince of Peace performed his first miracle.

Irony: The U.S. wants to promote democracy in the Middle East and do away with "Muslim fascism." Cheerleaders for Hezbollah abound in the Arab/Muslim world – a theme repeated in various international media in recent weeks – thanks to the recent war. Have the U.S. and Israel created their Frankenstein monster?

Irony: My Catholic daughter, 14, and I pray for peace in a Florida Catholic church. I'm a Presbyterian Protestant. But elsewhere parishioners praying for world peace continue to support the indiscriminate destruction of Lebanon in a bid to "fight terrorism." How many parishioners realize that Christians, too, have died, that Christian businesses have been ruined, that Christian moderates have been undermined, that Christians belong in the Middle East -- in fact that Christianity began in the Middle East – as much as Muslims and Jews?

Irony: Israel's touted smart bombs hit non-Hezbollah targets. The real culprits, we're told, are Iran and Syria yet helpless Lebanese civilians of different religious faiths are pummeled.

Irony: I expect to return to work at an American university in Lebanon, to teach and train Arab journalists to operate according to American standards of professionalism, and for them to learn from America's First Amendment to the Constitution, to appreciate America's values and work ethic, albeit in an Arab environment and cultural milieu. Will my credibility be compromised? Will my well-established reputation and track record be sustainable given anti-American sentiments resulting from pro-Israel policies?

Irony: U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice played Brahms to Asian foreign ministers in Malaysia as bombs fell on Beirut and parts of Lebanon. Remember Nero?

Irony: U.S. humanitarian medical and food assistance arrived at the port of Beirut during the heat of battle between Israel and Hezbollah, while the U.S. provided Israel with political and military cover to obliterate the country, and as many Lebanese-Americans Shiites were being evacuated to the United States.

Irony: Over a month after great swaths of Lebanon were pulverized and began running out of medicines, fuel supplies and food, President Bush directed that 25,000 tons of wheat be delivered the country.

He said America would send more aid to support humanitarian and reconstruction work for a total of more than \$230 million and would dispatch a presidential delegation of private sector leaders “to identify ways that we can tap into the generosity of American businesses and non-profits to continue to help the people of Lebanon.”

But pro-Israeli Congressional leaders have threatened to scuttle the aid package.

Irony: The Washington Post’s Anthony Shadid on June 12 wrote an article entitled “Smoke of Iraq War ‘Drifting Over Lebanon’,” a month before Hezbollah abducted and killed Israeli soldiers, triggering the Israeli onslaught.

Irony: In June 2006, Ralph Peters in Armed Forces Journal wrote “Blood Borders: How a Better Middle East Would Look” and suggested redrawing the region’s map, which was also provided in “before” and “after” living color.

Other pundits have tied the battle for, or on, Lebanon to the battle for oil, with ample graphics and maps to illustrate the point.

Suspicious Irony: Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh wrote in the New Yorker magazine that, “a Middle East expert with knowledge of the current thinking of both the Israeli and the U.S. governments, Israel had devised a plan for attacking Hezbollah—and shared it with Bush Administration officials—well before the July 12th kidnappings” of Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah.

Irony: I was evacuated by military forces I wrote so much about when I covered the Pentagon as a correspondent in Washington over two decades ago. My husband had been urging me to take Amy to the U.S. I hesitated the first 11 days of the conflict, thinking we’d ride out the wave. But as the situation got dicier and when Israeli forces hit non-Hezbollah-controlled regions, we worried about the ability to leave.

The Israeli-imposed siege was choking the country. We felt trapped. So I packed the two small bags the U.S. Embassy said would be our luggage and took two backpacks stuffed

with key documents and valuables. We also took food and water to last us the trip out since we'd been told to pack sustenance.

July 23, 2006

Our journey began at about 6:00 a.m. from Brummana, in Lebanon's Metn mountains, to reach the Dbayeh Bridge at 6:30 along the coastal highway north of Beirut. A crowd had already gathered with evacuees and loved ones seeing them off, bidding each other tearful goodbyes. We stood in the sun for hours going through several checkpoints manned primarily by U.S. Marines as Lebanese security forces looked on and Red Cross volunteers stood by to help with medical emergencies.

The first checkpoint crossed, we were asked to place our luggage in rows for dogs to sniff any suspicious or unacceptable contents. Marines also checked passports before letting us proceed to long waiting lines for yet another check – this one for the contents of the bags and carry-ons. We were issued numbers and told to proceed to hangars where we stood some more. Invalid or older people got plastic chairs.

Helicopters chopped the air above us ferrying sick and old evacuees from the U.S. Embassy compound overlooking the departure area to waiting warships. One landed on the strip in front of the hangar bringing U.S. officials to that spot. Former U.S. ambassador to Lebanon Vincent Battle (now retired in Lebanon) helped out with the evacuation. Outhouses were available, but cleanliness was not a priority.

We didn't get onto the first netted landing craft until 2:30 p.m. We were hot, sweaty and suffered from exposure. A massive tan for light-skinned people like me is downright dangerous. The amphibious troop carrier was brimming with people. Amy slept on the floor from exhaustion near our bags. Le Royal Hotel on the coast was in view as gun-mounted patrol dinghies plied the waters past us or delivered packs of bottled water. The evacuation seemed like a video/computer game.

Our amphibious craft docked almost inside the cavernous hold of the Landing Craft Utility (LCU) "USS Trenton." Over 300 crewmembers helped the 1,800 evacuees get on board in installments and directed them to various decks or cabins for the trip to Turkey. Sailors, petty officers and high-ranking navy personnel were playing hoteliers, babysitters and traffic cops.

Before emerging onto the upper decks we were told to leave the larger bags in the hold and take only what we needed overnight in carry-ons or backpacks. I'd packed bare essentials of clothing for a few days but carried vital documents, my trusty laptop, my new digital camera, a shortwave radio, flashlight, spare batteries, essential toiletries, medicines, water and dry snacks in a backpack. It weighed as much as the suitcase. Amy's backpack was smaller but equally stuffed with essentials and valuables.

A non-ending supply of water bottles was being provided the parched evacuees. After settling in, we were told that food was available in the mess hall. Amy opted for the ersatz chicken nuggets. I later treated my hiatal hernia to water, an apple, breadsticks and

dry snacks I'd brought along. Amy discovered vending machines in the mess hall – Cokes at \$1 a pop (excuse the pun).

The “Trenton” with a top speed of 18 knots was slow moving, circumventing the Israeli naval blockade, so the 10-hour journey took an additional two. Petty Officer 1st class John Briston explained: “It’s as fast as you’d ride a bike.”

Medics patrolled the decks in search of ailments or injuries. By the time we sat down on the floor (for lack of anything else) I slid down a metal wall with my back, feeling the impact of the heat and a probable drop in blood pressure. Amy got me a medic but I began recovering after eating a bit. By then we'd been on our feet for about 12 hours.

We were assigned the flight deck, with hundreds of others. Some lucky families got tents. We first got one blanket, then a second one. Amy then queued up for a folding cot that we shared (she sleeping semi-stretched out, me sitting up against the deck wall). At some point, I persuaded a sailor to provide me with a pillow. The hard wall behind me was ergonomically incorrect.

We sailed alongside the sunset and I maintained cell phone contact with my husband Joe, holding the fort in our mountain home, until the network disappeared from my screen. I didn't have roaming service. Amy and I wrapped up in the blankets against a chill night wind and I struggled to catch some sleep.

July 24, 2006

The “Trenton” finally docked at Mersin, Turkey, at about 10 a.m. A public service announcement in Arabic by the U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission in Turkey briefed evacuees on what to expect when they were to hit terra firma. She didn't tell them how long it would take to disembark. We didn't descend to the pier until 2:30 p.m. after roasting on deck. Angry passengers argued with bellowing marines who ordered them to stand in lines that they kept moving back. Children and infants became restless and cranky. Adults were outraged. Women and children were separated from men at one point. Sailors and marines blamed Turkish bureaucrats for the delay, but when we finally got off the ship U.S. Embassy personnel thanked Turkish officials for processing the evacuees “fast.” Turkish aid workers at dockside handed evacuees red carnations.

It took another eternity to get us processed by U.S. and Turkish officials dockside to move onto buses for the 90-minute ride to Incirlik air base outside Adana. A base purchasing office clerk and a Fox News fan handed us Meals Ready to Eat (MREs) in heavy plastic bags with heating elements for cooking on the run. Those indescribable field rations and the clerk's one-sided conversation would make an outing at a greasy spoon seem like a gourmet's delight. The packs smelled foul, the so-called food tasted horrible and probably did untold damage to our insides. Some defense contractors handling catering are raking fortunes at taxpayers' expense and injuring our troops.

On arrival we were stopped at the base gate for a sniffing dog check of the buses' holds. That was the first clearance. The convoy waited for the last group to enter en vehicle

masse to a processing point for a briefing on do's and don'ts at the base, safety precautions, medical advice and services, security measures, and communications facilities in an acoustically dreadful and horrendously hot hangar-cum-center. Our exhaustion was being stretched to the limits.

We were given room assignments, more MREs and taken to a drop-off point outside "Patriot Village" – barracks with a fancy name. But at least they were air-conditioned. The heat and dust outside were unpleasant. Luggage was trucked in from Mersin in stages and Amy and I didn't retrieve ours until midnight.

By then I had fallen asleep in the lower bunk of our eight double-bunk room occupied by a Shiite twenty-something mother with two of her four children, two Maronite Christian sisters, and an American Anglo-Saxon who was studying Arabic at our university. Amy had also checked her email (our first contact with the outside world) and sent messages from the "community center" to her father.

She showered in our dorm's common bathroom facilities while I slept in my clothes' stench, too tired and aching from all the traveling and carrying of things. She got the upper bunk.

July 25, 2006

The first planeload went out at 6:30 a.m. after soldiers banged on our barrack doors to alert us of a list for the first evacuees to be flown out. Assigned evacuees were given 20 minutes to prepare for the flight. We weren't on it and Amy slept through the banging.

When she woke up we headed to the chow line of fruits, cereals, muffins, tea, coffee, juice and milk. There was crowded (or no) seating at the messy tables. Catering to 1,800 evacuees is no affair at the Ritz. I ran into two of our university's staffers at breakfast. We lamented our collective fate and wished each other well.

Families and kids overran the showers and toilets. The floors were flooded and water sloshed around. So I waited for the cleaning crew before venturing into the shower stalls. That cleanliness is next to godliness is no exaggeration. I was in heaven after changing my clothes on the third day of our evacuation.

It was too hot to stand in the lunch line so Amy and I decided to buy tuna ready meals and snacks from the commissary and ate them in our room. The shop sells food items, phone cards, T-shirts, and cheap junk. There's free Internet at the community center but a limited number of terminals and each person gets to use them for 15 or 20 minutes at a stretch. It was an eternal wait for hundreds of evacuees.

They were a mixed bag – countless veiled women, mostly Lebanese southerners with huge families – heading back home to Dearborn or L.A. Our roommate's eight-year-old daughter asked me: "Why aren't you veiled?" I asked her the same question. Her reply: "I will be when I'm nine." My reply: "I'm a Christian. We don't wear veils." She seemed baffled.

We lounged about until 5:15 p.m. Amy had returned from the community center to announce we weren't on the next flight's list. But when it was posted at the end of our hallway, and I read our names, it was a rush to get ready for our 6:50 departure that evening.

We had to pack and sign up for departure processing. Amy was listed on a separate bus because of our different last names. After a little fuss I made sure we weren't separated.

Luggage was trucked to the small Incirlik terminal building. The airport handles large military and charter civilian aircraft. We went through security, then to a passenger service center (no tickets, just name checks). Scissors I'd already packed in my suitcase were taken out, wrapped, given a number and receipt and put back and locked. We were reprocessed for departure. We'd left our roommates behind.

By 7:30 we were still waiting in the lounge overflowing with hyperactive screeching children, frazzled parents and armed security personnel. Four "defense" types were also waiting to board our flight. Time zones on the wall read: Baltimore, Zulu, Ramstein, Incirlik, Manas.

I used one of three free Internet terminals at the airport to finally send Joe a message and to contact my boss in New York and an uncle in Virginia who was expecting us. I also read a message in my mail from the US Embassy in Beirut to Americans living there that the last scheduled evacuation ship would depart Lebanon on Wednesday July 26 from Dbayeh at 9:00. It said: "Do not wait for a call from the embassy." My heart sank for those left behind.

The Incirlik terminal cafeteria, appropriately named "American Eatery," offered the usual junk food fare next to a Turkish souvenir shop. Turkey owns and runs the base but there's no question how influential Uncle Sam is in this neck of the woods. TV screens in the lounge were tuned in to Fox News or wrestling matches. A big gumball machine and vending machines lined one wall. A table of freebies (water bottles, girl scout cookies, baby food and formula) lined another on the opposite end of the room.

Irony: As the last American evacuation ship was being announced, US Ambassador to Lebanon Jeffrey Feltman was seen on TV receiving a ship carrying US humanitarian aid to Lebanon.

We finally boarded our flight at 11:30 p.m. The ATA Boeing 757-200 was parked near a C-17 Globemaster III transport and other aircraft used by the U.S. Air Force. Amy and I were seated diagonally across the aisle from each other at 12:10. We were served two meals and liquids but no alcohol.

The flight took us to Ireland's Shannon airport for a refueling stop and we were allowed to deplane for a 45-minute pit stop and stretch. It was dark, after midnight, and I didn't see any blarney stones or quaff any Guinness.

July 26, 2006

On arrival at Philadelphia International Airport about 7:00 a.m. Wednesday we were met by American Red Cross representatives and a crisis team with Arabic speakers from the area. Our four-day evacuation was coming to an end.

“Welcome to Philadelphia. We know you have had a long journey. A coalition of federal, state and local governments and the American Red Cross have established a reception area where you can receive: food, medical attention, assistance with travel, including connecting flights, lodging, free internet access and phones, assistance for unaccompanied minors” said a flyer we were handed.

The evacuees were offered a buffet breakfast in one of the baggage areas closed off from the rest of the airport. We could feast on buns, bagels, original Philadelphia cream cheese, cereals, milks, yogurts, tea, coffee, sandwiches, cookies and snacks.

A medical team was on standby – Amy was treated for a stomach ache. There was also financial aid, onward travel assistance, free phones and free Internet service so I called Joe, my uncle in Virginia for the first leg of our stateside trip and my sister-in-law in Florida for our final destination.

After a light breakfast, I checked onward travel options and decided to rent a car and drive to Northern Virginia. That’s when the first sticker price shock began. Others were soon to follow.

Since our arrival (over a month) we’ve watched sanitized, ungory, and often rather biased news. U.S. channels don’t present the whole picture so I’ve had to rely on international websites for meat and substance. Many Americans are still oblivious to the extent of damage caused in Lebanon.

Evacuation is no picnic. It’s a very disruptive and unsettling experience. I enrolled Amy in a Florida school so she wouldn’t miss out on her academic year and fearful of how long the war would last.

We’ve since heard that schools will delay their fall opening and our university has rescheduled its summer and fall semester classes in light of developments. We expect to return in October, all things being equal.

But what of the incalculable damage to bodies, psyches and property? The war on Lebanon constitutes crimes against humanity in any civilized lexicon. Henri Piccioto, a Beirut-born Jew with fond memories of his life in Lebanon, wrote in The Daily Star, the country’s English-language newspaper, that American Jews’ silence about Israel’s wanton destruction was tantamount to complicity. He chastised them for their silence while equally blaming Hezbollah for its misguided adventure that sparked the conflagration.

Will anyone be held accountable?

As a student of “realpolitik,” I know it's a rhetorical question.

Magda Abu-Fadil is a Lebanese-American director of the Institute for Professional Journalists (IPJ) at the Lebanese American University and a 25-year veteran of international media in the U.S. and the Middle East, including Agence France-Presse, United Press International, Defense News, Asharaq Al-Awsat/Arab News dailies, Al-Riyadh/Al-Riyadh Daily, The Middle East magazine and Events magazine, to name a few. She taught journalism in Washington, D.C. and Lebanon and has trained journalists in the U.S. and Arab world.

IPJ aims at helping reporters, editors and managers in various print, broadcast and online media improve their operational skills in Arabic and English and at familiarizing them with the latest developments in their respective areas. IPJ also focuses on issues of media laws, ethics and freedom of expression in the Lebanese and Arab contexts. It offers programs such as workshops, seminars and conferences geared to familiarizing journalists with the tools of computerized newsrooms for writing and editing as well as capitalizing on information sources through the Internet.

Magda Abu-Fadil
Director, Institute for Professional Journalists
Lebanese American University
P.O. Box 13-5053
Chouran Beirut 1102 2801
Lebanon
Tel: (01) 786456 x. 1273
Fax: (01) 867098
Email: mafadil@lau.edu.lb
ipj@lau.edu.lb
<http://ipj.lau.edu.lb>
www.lau.edu.lb

