

Say NO to War in Lebanon

The Center for Democracy in Lebanon
May 15, 2008

The armed confrontations that took place in Lebanon starting on May 6, 2008 presented a grave situation reminiscent of the 1975 civil war, and thwarted peaceful efforts to reach a breakthrough in the political stalemate that plagues the country since December of 2006.

As we express our deepest grief and sympathy for the families of the deceased and the wounded of all sides and our dismay at the wanton destruction of civilian property and organizations, we strongly condemn the use of arms to resolve any political conflict in Lebanon. The Lebanese people have suffered enough wars, mayhem and oppression over the last 30 years and it is time they have peace.

In previous declarations, we have consistently affirmed the need for democratic and civil reform in our government. Many of our recommendations have already been implemented. However, several deadlocks remain in the face of progress towards a neutral, secular and democratic Lebanon, in peaceful coexistence with its neighbors.

Whereas throughout the political debate over the last 3 years, the focus has been mostly on the international tribunal and the rights of the opposition to have its share of political power in the government, be it a say in electing the president or the policy of the future cabinet;

Whereas the Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006, provoked by Hezbollah, has generated a lot of sympathy and support for the latter among the Lebanese population and pushed to the back burner discussions over the necessity of Hezbollah's arms;

Whereas the political gridlock has generated tension on the grounds and the Council of Ministers under PM Siniora has made little to appease these tensions and instead adopted unilateral decisions that prompted retaliatory measures from the opposition;

Whereas Hezbollah under the banner of the opposition has taken its arms to the streets of Beirut and Mount Lebanon in May 2008 and in contravention to the national consensus on the role of these arms and in an attempt to force a solution to the political stalemate – under the rubric of defending the security of the militia;

Whereas Hezbollah's use of force in Beirut and Mount Lebanon has substantiated fears that other militias have illegally retained medium and heavy weaponry, and has accentuated a simmering sectarian strife that threatens to plunge the country in a new civil war;

Whereas the citizens of Lebanon have suffered enough poverty and wars in their recent past only to become hostages of leadership failure at all levels of government, embargoed from a peaceful and normal life;

We stand in shock by recent events and hold those involved in the public affairs of Lebanon accountable, namely all the armed groups responsible for the lives lost, the blood spilled and the properties destroyed over the last week in Lebanon, and the political parties and religious leaders responsible for the collapse of the national dialogue and for dragging the country into a civil war.

Specifically, we hold Parliament under the leadership of Speaker Berri accountable for its failure to fulfill its legislative duties, including:

- 1) Failure to elect a President of the Republic within the constitutional time limits and until now.
- 2) Failure to provide any legislative oversight for the Cabinet of PM Fouad Siniora, using the excuse of illegitimacy.
- 3) Failure to provide a democratic and peaceful forum to debate policies and much needed reforms.

We also hold the Council of Ministers under the leadership of PM Siniora accountable for its failures to fulfill its constitutional, political and executive duties within the framework promulgated in the constitution, including:

- 1) Failure to live up to the constitutional guarantee of fair and balanced communal representation in any governmental body.
- 2) Failure to reach out and work with the opposition to build consensus for implementation of its agenda.
- 3) Failure to respond constructively to the basic economic and social needs of the people.
- 4) Failure to secure the country and the population in the aftermath of the July 2006 war and in May 2008.
- 5) Failure to maintain the appearance of fairness in its handling of executive matters.

To diffuse tension on the ground, we propose the following immediate steps:

All leaders must **support the Army's effort** to disarm all illegal militias and groups that engaged in the confrontations of last week.

The opposition must **remove all roadblocks, end the civil disobedience and remove the camp from Downtown Beirut** as these actions have not yielded any positive outcome for the opposition let alone for the populace at large.

Although we welcome well-intended foreign mediations, **we reject all calls for foreign intervention in the Lebanese internal affairs be they diplomatic or in the form of an Arab deterrent force**, which in the recent past intensified the conflict and prolonged it for 30 years under Syrian tutelage.

All involved parties must resume dialogue. The agenda of any reconciliatory dialogue must include a serious and open discussion of the role, the necessity and legitimacy of Hezbollah's arms in light of recent developments. Hezbollah's military wing has now been engaged against other Lebanese to leverage the party's political agenda in what resembled a military coup. This has put new emphasis on an anomaly that must be resolved. **The role and the political control of Hezbollah's arms must be a priority of any future dialogue.**

It is absolutely necessary that Hezbollah agree to disarm in principle and in a peaceful manner. Hezbollah's main argument for armament has been deterrence and defense against Israeli assault that otherwise cannot be handled by the Army. Israel's constant threat, provocation and military incursions along with its continuous detention of Lebanese prisoners and occupation of the Lebanese Shebaa farms are specific examples often cited in justification of Hezbollah's arms. To address these concerns, **a viable national defense strategy must top the priorities of any dialogue.** This strategy must rebuild confidence between the Resistance Movement and the state, concentrate the war decision in the hands of the central government, restore coordination between legitimate armed forces, maintain readiness for self defense and assimilate Lebanese resistance fighters under an exclusive national banner.

Any serious dialogue over Hezbollah's arms **must consider the status of the armistice with Israel and engage in an open and free debate on the best strategy to resume peace negotiations** between an independent Lebanon and the state of Israel. Unless and until the state of war with Israel has ended, and the Lebanese citizens feel secure from any Israeli threats to their safety, there will always be claims of legitimate resistance and the need for arms. The traditional government line and the rhetoric adopted by the current cabinet that Lebanon will be the last Arab state to negotiate peace with Israel is strategically amiss and does not serve our national interest.

Finally, we call upon all Lebanese to join our call to:

- 1) Pledge not to resort to violence to leverage political position.
- 2) Avoid sectarian and confessional overtones in political rhetoric.
- 3) Abide by the constitution and stand for the constitutional institutions even in the quest for change.
- 4) Work together on defining a list of national priorities that ensure for the citizens of Lebanon peace, security and prosperity.