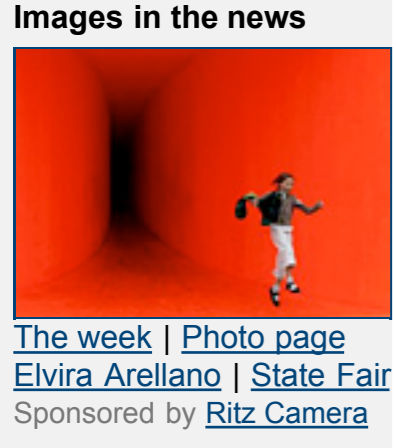




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## CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

# Toll in Lebanon bombing in dispute

### Rights group says fewer civilians died in Qana attack

**By Liz Sly, Tribune foreign correspondent. Tribune news services contributed to this report**  
*Published August 3, 2006*

BEIRUT -- The death toll from the Israeli bombing of a house in the southern Lebanese town of Qana in which civilians were taking shelter stands at 28 and not more than 50 as originally reported by Lebanon's government and the Lebanese Red Cross, according to a Human Rights Watch report issued Wednesday.

However, the Lebanese government and the Lebanese Red Cross said they had confirmed 57 deaths in the attack and they stood by their figures after the report was released.

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"It's confirmed that there are 57 bodies," said Elias Diab, an official in the Lebanese Red Cross operations room in Beirut. "Twenty-seven of them are children."

The discrepancy arises from the large number of people who had taken shelter from the bombardments in the three-story structure, which was crushed when it was hit in an air strike early Sunday, said the report by the New York-based watchdog group, which also documented numerous instances in which large numbers of civilians were killed in air strikes.

The report said researchers who visited the Qana site found no evidence of recent Hezbollah military activity in the area and accused Israel of a "systematic failure" to distinguish between military and civilian targets in its bombing of Lebanon.

"In dozens of attacks, Israeli forces struck an area with no apparent military target," the report said. "In some cases, the timing and intensity of the attack, the absence of a military target, as well as return strikes on rescuers, suggest that Israeli forces deliberately targeted civilians."

Israel acknowledged Thursday that the Qana strike was a mistake and said it would not have attacked had it known civilians were inside the house, The Associated Press reported. However, a statement on the findings of a military inquiry into the attack Sunday charged that Hezbollah guerrillas used civilians as human shields for their rocket attacks.

Eyewitnesses in Qana told rescue workers around 63 people from two extended families had taken shelter in the bombed building, and it was assumed most of them remained buried in the rubble when the government released its initial estimates of the toll. It now appears many managed to escape because the final number of bodies recovered stands at 28, including 16 children under the age of 12, according to Peter Bouckaert, a Human Rights Watch researcher who visited the site.

But Asma Andraos, a government adviser, said the Health Ministry also stood by its estimate of more than 50 killed. "I think nobody knows," she said.

"I'm sure there's plenty more under the rubble we don't even know about and most likely when this is over the death toll will be double what we know," she added, referring to the overall total of civilian casualties.

Human Rights Watch gives a figure of more than 500 deaths confirmed since the war began. Bouckaert said it is likely the toll is higher.

"I don't think there's any conscious effort to inflate the numbers," he said of the Qana attack. "I think it was the result of confusion and the fact that many had fled."

The killings at Qana stirred an outcry in Lebanon and across the region, prompting Lebanon's government to cancel a planned visit by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Israel's government to call a 48-hour moratorium on air strikes over the area.

On Tuesday, three news agencies said they stood by the veracity of pictures taken in Qana.

Photographers from The Associated Press, Reuters and Agence France-Presse all covered rescue operations Sunday in Qana; many photos depicted rescue workers carrying dead children.

A British Web site, the EU Referendum blog, argued that deception may have been involved by citing time stamps that went with captions of the photographs.

The site suggests these events were staged for effect, a criticism echoed by American talk show host Rush Limbaugh when he directed listeners to the blog this week.

The AP said information from its photo editors showed the events were not staged and that the time stamps could be misleading for several reasons, including that Web sites can use such stamps to show when pictures are posted, not taken. An AFP executive said he was stunned to be questioned about it. Reuters said in a statement that it categorically rejects any such suggestion.

The Human Rights Watch report also documents 23 cases in which a total of 153 civilians, including 63 children, died in strikes that for the most part did not have an obvious military target. At least 21 people were killed when their convoy of vehicles was hit as they tried to flee the village of Marwahin on July 15 after Israeli warplanes dropped leaflets in the area warning them to leave.

In an incident that may turn out to be the bloodiest of the war so far, 26 people are known to have died in a July 19 strike against the town of Srifa that destroyed 13 homes, with as many as 41 still missing and feared buried under the rubble. In this case, said Bouckaert, it does appear there are unrecovered bodies.

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