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Russians Tell Why They Decided to Stay in Tyre

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By Vadim Nikitin

Russians living in Lebanon spoke of bodies in freezers, bombed-out buildings and a growing scarcity of food, but not all felt certain that it was time to leave.

"There are lots of bodies everywhere. Bodies wrapped in garbage bags and plastic sheeting and put in fridges. People have brought their fridges and freezers to the basement, to put the bodies into," Katya Hubeidi, the Russian wife of a young Lebanese doctor, said by telephone, describing her neighborhood in a suburb of the port city of Tyre late last week.

Hubeidi said adults "were hiding all this from the children."

"We don't let them come close to the fridges, to the plastic bags," she said.

Hundreds of Russian citizens have fled Lebanon since Israel began a military offensive there two weeks ago. But some 500 remain, many of them doctors and other medical workers "who do not want to leave their hospitals, ... despite grave threats to their safety," said Vladimir Cherepanov, a spokesman for the Russian Embassy in Beirut.

Two doctors' families spoke by telephone about why they had stayed behind and how they were coping.

"I sent my wife and children to Russia, ... but I am staying here," said Wahid Saliami, a Lebanese-born Russian citizen who studied medicine in Moscow. "My patients need me. That is my duty as a surgeon; that is what they taught us in Russia."

Saliami, who helps run an association of Soviet university alumni with 5,000 members, said: "I have lived here through the occupation and civil war, but I have never seen such horror and destruction."

In the distant city of Tver, Saliami's wife, Marina, and their two children, Anastasia, 14 and Sadi, 4, fear for his life. "We are in constant contact, but of course they are very concerned about me," he said.

When he spoke by telephone Thursday, he had just learned that contact was lost with three Russian-trained Lebanese medics in the village of Bint Jbeil. The medics had taken refuge in the basement of a Christian school after their hospital was destroyed. "The UN cannot go in and rescue them because Israel will not allow anyone to enter the village," Saliami said. "I plead with you to inform readers of their plight; maybe someone can help."

The whereabouts of the medics were unclear Sunday.

Saliami said his hospital in Tyre was overwhelmed with patients and that he was

spending most of his time there, seldom risking the walk back to his apartment.

"There have been wounded people trying to reach the hospital on foot but they were shot at from planes," he said. "The Israelis shoot even the ambulances. Yesterday, they shot at an ambulance not far from here, and the driver was killed. Shoot at Hezbollah if you must, but why shoot at ambulances?"

He recounted how six wounded people recently arrived at the hospital. "They were part of a convoy of civilians going to the port, where a ship was taking refugees, when they were hit. Three of the victims were American, a mother and two children severely wounded in the face and neck," he said, his voice tensing. "Luckily, we managed to pull them through."

Such good news is rare in Tyre, however. "A dead 13-year-old girl is still lying on the ninth floor of a bombed-out building because there is no equipment to get her out," he said. "Many, many children have died. They die in their homes, with their families, believing that residential buildings will not be targeted, that the strikes are accurate."

No Russians are known to have been killed or injured. Saliami gave much of the credit for this to the Russian Embassy. "We are extremely grateful to the embassy staff here. They do everything they can to help everyone from the former U.S.S.R., as well as Lebanese people," he said. "They call hundreds of people every day, checking up on them, letting them know the latest."

Cherepanov, an embassy spokesman, said mass evacuations had ended but that people were still being sent to safety. "Of the 500 who chose to remain, many of them may reconsider if the conflict escalates tomorrow," he added.

The heavy fighting is beginning to take a toll on Katya Hubeidi, a nurse from Igorsk in the Moscow region, and her husband, Salim, a 35-year-old general practitioner who studied at Moscow's People's Friendship University.

"This cursed war!" Salim Hubeidi exclaimed. "I don't know what decision to make anymore, whether to stay or to go. The fighting is escalating but our apartment, everything we have, is here."

His wife added: "We have nowhere to go if we go to Russia. We sold everything we had to come here and settle down. We can only leave if the Russian government helps us find somewhere to live, but no one has told us if this help is available."

Katya Hubeidi said she grew up an orphan and had lost touch with the only family she knew in Russia, a distant aunt. She said her in-laws had never accepted the couple's adopted son, and this had made it impossible for her to join them when they fled over the border to Syria.

The couple, their son, Ruslan, 16, and daughter, Fatima, 9, are among the last people still living in a suburb of Tyre that was once home to many families with ties to the former Soviet Union. "We feel very alone. My husband is a doctor, and people respect him, but I am still a foreigner here," said Katya Hubeidi, struggling to speak over a loud hum. She said an unmanned Israeli drone was flying close to their house.

"All day, the Israeli drones fly by, filming everything, and as soon as night falls, the helicopters come in and drop explosives," she said. "The explosives look like toys, so we don't let our children go outside."

She said daily life had become a fight for survival. "The Israelis have bombed the bakery, so there is no more bread. They have bombed the pharmacy and the supermarket. Everything necessary for people to live has been destroyed."

A local mosque distributes bread every week, but the rations are so small that in the previous week the Hubeidis received only 10 loaves, she said. They have run out of bottled water and rely on tap water, which now flows yellow.

"My husband no longer goes to work in the hospital because he does not want to leave us alone for long. So he moves around the neighborhood, taking calls and treating wounded people nearby," she said.

The family sleeps in the basement of their four-story apartment building. A week ago, a nearby apartment building similar to theirs was bombed. "There is an empty space there now, as if there was never any building at all," Katya Hubeidi said.

Some 5,000 homes have been damaged or destroyed in Lebanon, the BBC reported.

Like thousands of other civilians caught in the fighting, the Hubeidis say they cannot understand what is happening.

"Hezbollah has left for the hills, there are no fighters here. Yet they are still bombing our homes," Salim Hubeidi said.

Appealing to President Vladimir Putin, he added: "Russia is still a great and mighty country. Only Putin can stand up to the Americans and pressure them to stop Israel."

Even if they decide to leave, it is becoming harder for the Hubeidis and others like them to evacuate safely with each passing day. After a recent raid, a family friend panicked and decided to drive out of town, Katya Hubeidi said. His car was almost immediately hit by a rocket.

"Everyone ran outside, crying, trying to drag him out, but he burned to death," she said, her voice growing frantic.

"We used to eat together, and now he is dead. Please help us! Please do something to pressure the government to get us out and find us shelter in Russia."