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## The war's other victim: the environment

**By Fouad Hamdan**

Commentary by

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An environmental catastrophe unfolded on July 12 when war broke out between Israel and Hizbullah. Around 1,000 people were killed in the course of the fighting and thousands more injured on both sides of the border. But in addition to the human tragedy, the environment took a number of deadly blows. The coastlines of Lebanon and Syria were polluted by oil spills, Turkey and Cyprus may be hit by the slicks in the coming weeks, and forest fires raged in Lebanon and Israel.

In Lebanon, Israeli warplanes bombed the oil-fueled power plant of Jiyeh, located directly on the coastline, about 30 kilometers south of Beirut. Storage tanks caught fire and burned for a long time. At least 15,000 tons of heavy fuel oil were spilled into the Mediterranean. Due to the south-north currents and winds, the whole Lebanese coastline north of Jiyeh has been polluted. Beautiful beaches all along the coast are now black and foul-smelling. Fishing boats in the scenic Phoenician port of Byblos are immobilized as the filthy oil congeals around them.

The Syrian coastline around the port city of Tartous has also been hit. Huge oil carpets are moving slowly toward Turkey. They may also hit Cyprus if winds and currents are unfavorable. The ecological and economic consequences for the region's tourist industry could be disastrous.

The fuel oil along the coast is currently taking the form of a thick and soft mass similar to fluid asphalt. It is highly toxic and has the potential to kill all marine life. Hydrocarbons concentrate in all organisms exposed to it. They are carcinogenic and damage hormone systems in all living beings. On beaches in Jiyeh, Beirut and near Tripoli, already endangered green turtles have buried their eggs. Baby turtles start to hatch now, but they have little hope of completing their first fateful journey across the beach to the water. Coastal fisheries will be affected for years to come and the livelihood of fishermen destroyed. Lebanon's tourism industry, which had seen a revival in recent years, has been struck at its heart.

Lebanese groups are currently planning a clean-up operation. They will be aided by scientists and local authorities. Volunteers want to pump oil from the sea and clear away oil-polluted sand and pebbles from several coastal hot spots. The collected oil and contaminated sand will be stored in tanks for future treatment. Several private companies will support the clean-up activity, supplying equipment and

transportation and safely storing the tanks after the operation. A massive clean-up operation must start as soon as possible to save the coastline. Through fishing and tourism, the coastline could be a lifeline for this latest postwar reconstruction.

Across the border in Israel, large forest areas in the Galilee have been burned down due to missiles fired by Hizbullah. Israeli authorities have estimated that 9,000 acres of land, including about 3,000 acres of forest, were damaged by fire in the first four weeks of cross-border fighting. About 500,000 trees were destroyed during that period. Firemen, aided by planes spraying fire retardant on the fires, battled almost 500 fires.

The forests hit hardest by the Hizbullah rocket attacks were in Biria, Beit Keshet, Shlomi, Meron and in the Naftali mountain range. Israeli experts predicted that even if the fighting had ended on August 8, it would still have taken the damaged forests 50 to 60 years to reach the state they were in before the war. In Southern Lebanon, uncontrolled small forest fires also raged following Israeli bombings. In the current dry heat of the Middle East summer, the few forests in the region are particularly vulnerable.

The European Union has sent advisers to Lebanon and urgent action is needed. The environmental and health impacts produced by the war will increase as more oil washes ashore or solidifies and sinks to the bottom of the sea. A massive clean-up operation of Lebanon's and Syria's coastlines must start as soon as possible. The EU should swiftly send special boats to the Eastern Mediterranean to suck as much oil from the sea surface as possible. And now that the war seems to have ended, large-scale reforestation projects should take place in Israel and Lebanon.

**Fouad Hamdan** set up Greenpeace in Lebanon in 1994-1999. He is now executive director of Friends of the Earth Europe, a campaign and lobby organization in Brussels influencing the environmental policies of the European Union. He wrote this commentary for **THE DAILY STAR**.