JAMES RON

Many hope that Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon will bring peace to the troubled border. But without acknowledgment of the destruction visited on Lebanon by Israel over the last 32 years, some Lebanese will not forgive and forget. Guerrillas will continue to fire rockets over Israel's northern frontier, triggering retaliations and more fighting. If the international community pushes Israel to acknowledge and compensate its Lebanese victims, however, the hostilities will finally end. I'll take a first step by apologizing for my own misdeeds.

My first Lebanon raid was in 1986. I was a 19-year old Israeli conscript, and my paratroop platoon was sent to a village whose name I can't recall. Within moments after arriving, I provided security for two Lebanese militiamen and their Israeli handler. We broke down the door of a home, shoved the family aside, and pulled a middle-aged man outside. After blindfolding him and tying his hands behind his back, we took him to a secluded alley, forced him to his knees and put a gun to his head, threatening to shoot if he didn't talk. A United Nations peacekeeper appeared and put an end to that incident, but there was more to come.

The next day we performed a mock execution on a 10-year old Lebanese boy. We forced his family into the kitchen and dragged him to a nearby orchard. My lieutenant pressed the child's face into the dirt while I jammed my rifle against his skull. Although the officer threatened to shoot his head off, the boy did not respond, keeping silent even after we threatened to throw him from the roof of his three-story home.

 I was a recent transfer from another unit, and my colleagues were more familiar with the drill. I watched and learned as they blew off doors with explosives, poured sacks of flour onto dirt floors, scattered utensils, broke dishes, and rifled through drawers. For days we ransacked the village, searching for signs of guerrilla presence. The elderly, female, and young villagers were trapped in their homes, ordered to observe a 24-hour curfew. Their men were gathered in a central square, blindfolded, and hauled off for questioning. When I and another soldier expressed reservations, we were ridiculed by our colleagues. More often than not, however, we thought little about the villagers we were tormenting.

Casual brutality was not limited to lower-income recruits. Omri, child of a senior intelligence officer, liked to fire bursts towards villagers peeking through doorways. Rafi, son to a liberal parliamentarian, kicked a cup of hot tea into an elderly man's face. Several were from kibbutzim, others from middle-class families, and our lieutenant was devoutly religious. We were one of the standing army's most elite and disciplined units.

My experience was a small part of a long-running conflict. During the 1947-49 war, over 750,000 Palestinians lost their homes to the new Israeli state, and many fled to Lebanon. In the late 1960s, Palestinian guerrillas began raids from Lebanon, provoking powerful retaliations. After their main Jordanian base was crushed in 1971, Lebanon became a new center of guerilla activity. Palestinian attacks killed 332 Israelis between 1967 and July 1982. In return, Israel killed 5-6,000 Lebanese and Palestinians. The fighting helped trigger a 15-year Lebanese civil war which claimed 75,000-120,000 lives.

During the 1970s, Israeli shelling emptied dozens of villages and drove an estimated 300,000 civilians into Beirut's slums. Northern Christian militias received Israeli arms and training, while Syria supplied Israel's opponents. In the south, Israeli-paid gunmen acted as informants, interrogators, and enforcers. Israel's strategy was to disrupt Palestinian guerrillas by punishing the surrounding Lebanese population, but the result was deeply-felt Lebanese anger.

Israel invaded in 1982 to end Palestinian political ambitions. Jewish nationalists were eager to annex the West Bank and Gaza, and many believed this first required smashing the Palestinians' Lebanon base. One goal of the invasion, later publicized by Israeli journalists, was to deport Palestinian refugees from Lebanon with Christian militia help. The plan later collapsed, along with Israel's other grand designs.

During the invasion's first months, Israel killed 12,000-15,000 persons, losing only 360 dead itself. Although the Israeli casualties were combatants, most of their victims were civilians. Israel pounded Palestinian camps and Lebanese slums to drive the guerrillas out, turning neighborhoods into rubble and burying lives, homes, and possessions. Israel's allies doubled as death squads, massacring hundreds in Tel el-Zatar, Sabra, Shatila, el-Khiam, and elsewhere.

Palestinian fighters were eventually driven from Beirut, but Israeli brutality helped created new enemies. Islamist fighters began to attack Israeli troops and fire rockets into Israel, stimulating further reprisals. When Jewish civilians were forced into shelters, journalists diligently conveyed their suffering, but did not give Israel's victims equal attention. With television dwelling on Israeli rather than Lebanese pain, the more plentiful Israeli-induced casualties became remote statistics.

How do nations move beyond such conflicts? Recent history suggests that political deals are not enough, and that truth-telling is vital. Consider South Africa, where a commission requires former abusers to acknowledge their crimes in return for amnesty. Or consider El Salvador and Guatemala, where commissions have published definitive accounts of official wrong-doing, helping the political healing. The international community has advocated reconciliation through truth-telling and accountability in other instances, including Argentina, Congo, Cambodia, Chad, Chile, Indonesia, Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, and now Sierra Leone. In these and other cases, war termination can be helped by official recognition of the victims' pain, sincere apologies, and financial compensation. Why should Lebanon be different?

If Israel wants a peaceful border, it must do more than withdraw from a mess it helped create, since Palestinians and Lebanese languishing in camps and slums still harbor great bitterness towards Israel. If it wants to end this anger, Israel should recognize and compensate those it harmed. If Israel will not do so on its own, the international community should pressure it to do so. If other countries can face up to their unpleasant pasts, why not Israel?

Let me begin by asking forgiveness from the 10-year old whose name I never knew, and from the village whose name I no longer recall.

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for international human rights groups.