

Lebanese still homeless, crisis not over

REUTERS, Beirut

Most Lebanese displaced by the war have returned to their villages but many remain homeless because their houses are destroyed or littered with unexploded bombs, UN agencies said on Thursday.

They also warned of a possible food crisis because of the conflict's impact on local harvests but said it would reduce an appeal for emergency funds made at the start of the war.

Lebanon's government has said 97 percent of the 900,000 to one million people who fled fighting between Israel and Hezbollah had returned to their towns following an August 14 truce.

But the UNHCR refugee agency in hard-hit south Lebanon, where many villages were severely damaged by Israeli ground and air attacks, said a third had found their homes uninhabitable.

"Only 60-70 percent have actually returned to their homes. The rest are staying with host families or in nearby villages," UNHCR spokeswoman Reem Alsalem said.

"The main problem is their houses are destroyed or it's too

dangerous because of unexploded ordnance. I don't see any large changes in the situation any time soon." UN explosive experts have confirmed 249 Israeli cluster bomb strikes, and unspent bomblets have killed eight and wounded at least 38 since the shooting stopped.

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have accused Israel of violating international law by targeting civilian areas. The Jewish state says its attacks were directed at stopping Hezbollah rocket attacks.

Israel said it has passed maps to the UN force UNIFIL which showed where its exploded ordnance might lie. "We did this in an attempt to minimise casualties among the Lebanese population," an Israeli army spokesman said.

The five-week war claimed 1,200 lives, mostly civilians, in Lebanon. At least 157 Israelis, most of them soldiers, died.

CRISIS STILL LOOMS

Emergency Relief Coordinator David Shearer said the U.N.'s relief agencies would reduce an appeal for \$150 million in donations for emergency activities ahead of an August 31 donors' conference in Sweden because the end of fighting meant the focus should shift towards longer-term rebuilding.

"The flash appeal was launched in an entirely different situation," he said. "We're now looking at a figure of around \$110 million ... It might be a little more or a little less."



Mahila Awami League stages a token hunger strike at Bangabandhu Avenue in Dhaka yesterday demanding trial of the perpetrators of the August 21 grenade attacks on an AL rally. A total of 24 leaders and activists, including Ivy Rahman, were killed in the attack.

Doctor warns over Everest deaths

REUTERS, London

Climbers on Mount Everest need a better understanding of altitude sickness to halt an increase in deaths there, a doctor who climbed the world's highest peak earlier this year said yesterday.

Andrew Sutherland of the Nuffield Department of Surgery in Oxford, England, said the unofficial death toll on Mount Everest had already reached 15 this year -- the highest since 1996 when 16 people died, eight in one night after an unexpected storm.

Writing in the latest edition of the British Medical Journal, Sutherland said climbers often confused fitness with their ability to survive at high

altitudes. "In my view, climbers are not climbing beyond their ability but instead beyond their altitude ability," he said.

Despite better understanding of acclimatization, improved climbing equipment and established routes, the death rate on Everest remains alarmingly high, with about one death for every 10 successful ascents.

Many climbers die from high altitude cerebral edema (HACE) and high altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE) - two kinds of altitude sickness that can cause a fatal accumulation of fluid in the brain or lungs.

HIV drug stops cervical cancer in lab test

REUTERS, London

A commonly used HIV medicine may also help prevent cervical cancer and could be developed into an anti-cancer cream, early laboratory tests by British scientists suggest.

Researchers at the University of Manchester said yesterday that test-tube studies showed the drug lopinavir selectively killed human papilloma virus (HPV) -- the virus that causes cervical cancer -- as well as HIV.

Lopinavir belongs to a class of HIV drugs known as protease inhibitors. It is a key component of Abbott Laboratories Inc's best-selling pill Kaletra.

Dr Ian Hampson and his colleagues in Manchester believe lopinavir could eventually be made into a simple cream or pessary,

offering an alternative to surgery for women with precancerous lesions.

No clinical trials have yet commenced, however.

Results of the team's early research will be published in next month's issue of the journal Anti-Viral Therapy and will also be presented at the International HPV meeting in Prague on September 5.

Merck & Co Inc and GlaxoSmithKline Plc have both developed ground-breaking vaccines to prevent strains of HPV that cause most cases of cervical cancer.

But Hampson said not all women would be vaccinated and not all lesions would be prevented by the new shots, leaving a role for non-surgical therapies such as his team's proposed cream.

Childhood allergy epidemic on the rise worldwide

REUTERS, London

Childhood allergies are on the rise around the world, including in many developing countries where asthma, eczema and hay fever are emerging as important public health problems, scientists said yesterday.

Asthma, in particular, is responsible for millions of children missing school, ending up in hospital or even dying.

The underlying cause of the condition is inflammation of the airways but just what triggers the problem and why some people develop asthma and others do not is still poorly understood.

What is clear, however, is that more and more young children are suffering allergic disorders, with the prevalence of all allergies increasing notably in the past decade.

Researchers who carried out the International Study of Asthma and

Allergies in Childhood in 1991 repeated the survey in 2002 and 2003 and found widespread increases in prevalence in 56 countries, especially among young children.

The study -- details of which were published in the latest edition of the Lancet medical journal -- surveyed parents of 193,000 children aged 6-7 years and 305,000 children aged 13-14 years in countries as diverse as South Africa, Brazil, Iran, Canada and Sweden.

The increases were greatest for eczema in the younger age group and for hay fever in both age groups. In the older age group, however, where prevalence of asthma had been high, there were some signs of decreases.

Nonetheless, in Britain -- one of the developed countries with the worst allergy epidemics -- asthma prevalence went up to 20.9 from

18.4 percent, hay fever increased to 10.1 from 9.8 percent and eczema to 16 from 13 percent between 1991 and 2003.

Professor Innes Asher of the University of Auckland, New Zealand, lead author of the study, said the rise in prevalence in many countries was "concerning," especially as allergies often occurred in large population centres.

"Although changes in mean annual prevalence to the order of 0.5 percent might sound small, such changes could have substantial public health implications, especially since the increases took place most commonly in heavily populated countries," he said.

Experts say a host of factors including air pollution, diet, lifestyle and exposure to bacteria in early life are likely to be linked to the rise in asthma and other allergies, but the reasons are likely to vary from place

to place. Given the diversity of the condition, the Lancet said in an editorial that asthma was in fact unlikely to be a single disease and the term should be abolished altogether.

A separate study published in the journal reinforced the benefits of combination medicines in tackling asthma.

Dr Klaus Rabe of Leiden University in the Netherlands said a 12-month study involving more than 3,000 people showed that giving asthma patients a top-up dose of AstraZeneca's two-in-one drug Symbicort to relieve their symptoms was more effective than giving them a single drug top-up.

All patients in the study were already on a maintenance dose of Symbicort, which combines a corticosteroid with a long-acting beta agonist.