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WORLD

U.S. family: Get us out of Lebanon

Parents and children hear bomb explosions all night

By Kate King
CNN

Tuesday, July 18, 2006; Posted: 10:46 p.m. EDT (02:46 GMT)

(CNN) -- The Esseily family was winding up a vacation in Lebanon when the airstrikes began. Nearly a week later, they're still looking for a way to get back to California.

Tony and Monika Esseily and their three children were asleep in their apartment, nearing the end of a month-long holiday, when Israel began bombing Beirut.

"It was an extreme shock when I woke up and -- actually, we heard it," Monika Esseily told CNN. "3:20 in the morning, we got up, and the whole sky was just alit. And I'm like, 'Oh no, oh no, oh no.'"

Beirut's airport was closed after Israel warplanes bombed its runways, and every night is punctuated by the sound of airstrikes. ([Read story on recent airstrikes](#))

"I have two kids [and] a baby, and they're scared. I'm scared," Esseily said. "First time I've ever encountered something like this."

The Esseilys are among tens of thousands of Westerners stranded in Lebanon Tuesday waiting for help to arrive. Monika Esseily said she's in contact with many other Americans in Lebanon and that all of them want to get out. ([Watch how frustration is growing over the evacuation of Americans -- 1:41](#))

"They're pulling out their hair, they're crying, they're saying 'What's going on?' They're being rejected from the American Embassy," she said. "The American Embassy is still saying, 'We will call you.' That's all that they will say."



COURTESY ESSEILY FAMILY

The Esseily family anxiously awaits evacuation from Beirut.

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Wanted son baptized in Lebanon

Some Europeans and Americans have piled on to cruise ships to flee the country.

The United States expects to evacuate more than 2,400 Americans from Lebanon by Thursday, most of them aboard two chartered ships, State Department and Pentagon officials said Tuesday. ([Full story](#))

The Esseily family registered Thursday with the American Embassy to get on the list to evacuate but so far haven't heard anything, she said.

"I just would love them to contact the Americans and say ... 'Hey, we know you're here, and we'll protect you, and we'll get you out.' Even if we have to pay, I don't care... They need to contact us," she said.

Nicholas Burns, the U.S. undersecretary of state for political affairs, defended the evacuation so far as "very well thought out."

"We have an open line to all American citizens. We're in touch with them by Web site. Those Americans who wish to leave will obviously go out," he told CNN Tuesday.

About 350 of the estimated 25,000 American citizens in Lebanon had been flown to Cyprus from the U.S. Embassy in Beirut by nightfall Tuesday, Maura Harty, the assistant secretary of state for consular affairs, told reporters.

Esseily said the apartment where the family is staying is in a relatively safe place, in the mountains about 15 miles from the main targets of the airstrikes. But Israeli jets fly right over the building on their bombing runs, she said, and the family hears bomb explosions all night.

"It's very loud, very scary," she said. "The glass shakes."

Tony Esseily is Lebanese, and Monika Esseily is American. They made the trip this summer so their 9-month-old son, T.J., could be baptized in Lebanon.

'I'm very saddened and I'm very, very scared'

Monika Esseily first saw Lebanon in 1990, three months after the country's 15-year civil war ended, as a new bride going to meet her husband's family.

"It was devastation. I cried driving out of the airport," she remembered. "I also was scared because coming out of the airport you had all the [Iranian Ayatollah] Khomeini and all of those Hezbollah signs even then."

The family lived in Lebanon from 1993 to 2001 and watched the country recover from years of war.

[evacuate Americans -- for a fee](#) (2:19)



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"I went everywhere," Monika Esseily said. "I enjoyed it; it was a beautiful country. The people are beautiful. They were madly trying to build up Lebanon."

The scene now, she said, is a "flashback to 1990."

"I'm very saddened, and I'm very, very scared for not just the Lebanese people, [but] for the foreigners who still have not got out," she said.

When the Esseilys heard last week that Hezbollah militants had abducted two Israeli soldiers in a cross-border raid, they knew there might be trouble.

"Wednesday night, we went to downtown Beirut to visit a shopping mall," she recalled. "Normally in that place in downtown Beirut ... it would have been very packed. ... And we did hear that, uh-oh, probably Israel is going to retaliate."

"But we were not thinking Beirut. Maybe we were thinking, OK, they were going to retaliate in the south. ... We didn't know that this was going to be extreme like this."

She said the U.S. Embassy should have been better prepared for the crisis.

"It's a very insecure country, and other countries as well around this area. The American Embassy should always have a backup evacuation plan. They knew that this was going to happen at least 12 or 24 hours before it did," she said.

Esseily said she can't wait to get the family home to Dana Point, California, but she still has mixed feelings about leaving Lebanon.

"I will have a heartache leaving," she said, "because I will leave all of these wonderful Lebanese people behind in sorrow and heartache."

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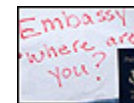


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