

Muslims find sanctuary in Christian areas

'It is a pity that only misfortune unites us'

Beirut (AFP) "We came here because it is a Christian area that the Israelis will not bomb," said Faten Fneish, one of thousands of Shiites who sought refuge from Israel's military offensive on Lebanon at refugee centres in Christian neighbourhoods.

Fneish fled her home in the southern village of Maarabun when she heard Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah warning that difficult days lay ahead, as Israel's wrath rained down after the militant group's capture of two Israeli soldiers.

The veiled mother of five was sitting in the courtyard of a public school turned into a centre for destitute displaced people in Karm Al Zaytun, a Christian quarter of Beirut where crucifixes and madonnas stood on every corner.

Outside the school was a banner showing an old portrait of late president-elect Bashir Gemayel, once the leader of the Christian Lebanese Forces militia, shaking hands with his lieutenant Samir Geagea — back when he was still wearing a fearful black beard and military fatigues.

The two men may be venerated by some Christians, but for the Shiite displaced families they are the ugly face of a militia responsible for a number of massacres during the 1975 to 1990 civil war which still scar the social fabric in Lebanon.

"It is the first time we dare to come to this Christian neighbourhood," said another veiled woman, Labibeh Khorshid, running her eyes across balconies overhead where neighbours gazed at the displaced families hanging their clothes to dry on the decorated windows of the classrooms.

"At first, we felt very unwelcome. People frowned at us or made comments on our veils. But now, we feel overwhelmed. They are giving us clothes, food, medicine and all," she said.

Heartfelt stories

Her 10-year-old son Timer is very happy. His eyes sparkle when he recalls the heartfelt stories told to the displaced children by two volunteer women — both Christian.

"I wish we could return this favour," she said, telling how residents of the neighbourhood have been taking in displaced children to give them warm showers at home on a daily basis.

"It is a pity that only misfortune unites us. This shows that when we the

people are left to each other, we can live together in peace and harmony. It is only politics and leaders that create these rifts," she said.

And the persons bringing together Christians and Muslims at the school, are hardly believers themselves. They are members of a leftist, secular movement. One of the volunteers is a young man called Guevara whose twin brother is named Fidel.

"A shop near the school which at first refused to receive the displaced people was now offering sugar-coated ice-cream cones for free to their children," Guevara said.

In the school playground, a man is writing elegant

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A refugee

Arabic calligraphy on the wall. He is an artist who wants to leave a lasting mark to thank residents of the neighbourhood for their warm welcome to the southern villagers.

Israel unleashed vicious attacks mainly on Shiite regions, strongholds of Hezbollah in the rural south and the capital's southern slums. Beirut, which is predominantly Sunni and Christian, has opened its schools and public gardens for the displaced who are virtually all Shiites.

Even in southern Christian towns and villages which are perceived as less likely to be hit, homes, convents and schools have offered room for displaced people, mostly Shiites.

An elderly man explains the situation with an old Arab proverb: "Me and my brother against our cousin, and me and my cousin against the enemy." The sight is a stark difference from events of last year.

After Lebanon's pro-Syrian camp was blamed for the 2005 murder of popular Sunni prime minister Rafik Hariri — who maintained close alliances with the Christians — the Shiite community, whose leaders are Damascus allies, felt cornered.