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By a CWI reporter, Beirut

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Lebanon has been wracked by a week of armed clashes between supporters of the Western backed Fouad Siniora government and the Hezbollah-led opposition. More than 60 people are reported dead. Hezbollah fighters soon routed the pro-government forces.

Today, (13 May), Saudi Arabia, a supporter of the Lebanese government, accused Iran of supporting a “coup” by Hezbollah. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad replied: “Iran is not the only country interfering”. Smarting after the quick setbacks inflicted on its Lebanese allies’ setbacks, the US sent a guided missile destroyer, the USS Cole, back to the Eastern Mediterranean. President George Bush said he would offer to “strengthen” Lebanon’s army so it can disarm Hezbollah. The conflict began after the government moved to shut down Hezbollah’s telecoms network and to sack the chief of security at Beirut’s airport for allegedly acting on behalf of Hezbollah. The days of fierce fighting brought back memories of the horrors of the long 1975-90 civil war, which also involved Syria and Israel.

A CWI member in Beirut looks at the events of the last few days.
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Lebanon has been politically paralyzed for 18 months, unable to elect a new president (for 6 months) because of a deadlock between government and opposition forces, in which neither side has the strength to prevail over the other.

The situation also has a regional and international dimension: the Lebanese government parties, led by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, are backed by the Western powers. The opposition, led by Hezbollah, is backed by Syria and Iran.

Then came the ‘telephone crisis’. Just over a week ago, Walid Jumblatt, leader of Lebanon’s Druze minority and an opponent of Hezbollah, accused the militant Shiite party of maintaining its own private telephone network and of using security cameras to monitor Beirut airport with the possible aim of staging attacks or kidnappings.

Tuesday 6 May

On Tuesday 6 May, at 4.30 am, and after an 11 hour government cabinet meeting, a decision was taken to consider the Hezbollah communication system “illegal”. This system was a key factor in the resistance of Hezbollah against Israel, in 2006. In addition, the government condemned Hezbollah’s monitoring of Beirut airport with cameras (placed in a Shiite area facing the airport) and fired the pro-Hezbollah chief of airport security.

Meanwhile, preparations for a general strike, called by the General Trade Union, and prepared for over one

month, went ahead. The General Trade Union, brings together all Lebanon’s unions. However, it is relatively weak, as the unions only organises around 7% of the Lebanese working class. The strike was called over popular demands: for wage increases and against rising prices.

Wednesday 7 May

The opposition sent their youth to the street, exploiting or rather hijacking the general strike called by the union federation over purely economic demands. This quickly led to the blocking of all roads to the airport. Despite the fact that the strike was cancelled at 10:45 am on 7 May, opposition armed militias went onto the streets and were countered by pro-government militias. Hails of stones was exchanged between youth supporting either side. These youth live side by side on the southern edges of the city – quite literally a stone’s throw from each other. First gunshots were heard and then the fighters were deployed.

The militia linked to Prime Minister Siniora – many of them young unemployed workers recruited from poor areas in the North, after some basic military training - were no match to Hezbollah’s fighters. It appears that some of the pro-Siniora militia commanders fled before the fight started.

While the conflict does have a sectarian dimension – the fighters are mostly Shiites, on one side, and Sunnis and Druze, on the other - it is still, first and foremost, a struggle between two irreconcilable political agendas.

The conflict has not yet become completely sectarian, despite the best efforts of media commentators in the pay of the government and the press's rich Saudi masters (who control much of the Arab media) to discredit Hezbollah. They depict Hezbollah as hell-bent on turning Lebanon and the Levant into a Shiite-Arab foothold of a new Persian Empire. However, so far, no ethnic cleansing has occurred, although, of course, in a society divided along sectarian and religious lines the danger of it developing exists.

Hezbollah and Amal's fighters uprooted their opponents from their positions in neighborhoods that are often Sunni-dominated, but mostly mixed, or intertwined with Shiite neighborhoods, but, so far, have left civilian residents alone, regardless of religion and sect. They have not apprehended known supporters from the other side who did not take part in the fighting. Those captured in the fighting were handed over to the army. Likewise, no plundering or rampage, occurred, or deliberate bombing of residential buildings that are not used as armed positions. Apart from those unlucky enough to be living near the armed clashes, people living in Beirut were not under immediate threat. The prime minister decries "massacres" and "people being attacked in their houses", but it remains undisclosed where this was meant to have actually taken place (apart from in Tripoli, where it appears that the assailants came from Siniora's own party).

Thursday 8 May

The situation on 8 May was relatively calm in the morning, with intermittent firefights in specific places of the western part of Beirut, and with some armed clashes reported in Tripoli, Saida, and the Bekaa Valley. Roads were still blocked by the opposition and government forces. The Lebanese population and even armed fighters awaited to hear Hezbollah's Secretary General, Nasrallah, speak at 4 pm.

According to Nasrallah, replacing the chief of airport security was part of a government plan to turn the airport into "a base for the CIA and the Israeli Mossad".

Nasrallah considered that the communications network was of crucial importance for Hezbollah's operations during the 2006 war against Israel (directing their fighters and orchestrating the missile attacks on Northern Israel). In addition, it would be of equal importance in any future confrontation, it would be vital to maintain secure communications between military headquarters and forces on the field. No doubt, Nasrallah also realized that allowing Hezbollah's communications to be penetrated or disrupted could mark the beginning of the end for his movement's military effectiveness.

Nasrallah considered that government's decisions as an open attack on Hezbollah - a declaration of war. In an earlier speech, Nasrallah stated that "any hand" that tries to attack his movement's apparatus will be "cut". Therefore, the government's decision was regarded by Nasrallah as an attempt to start the disarming of Hezbollah. Nasrallah stated he considered his movement was under attack, and it will protect itself by any means, including with arms. Nasrallah announced that his fighters would stay on the streets until the government pulled back.

The sacked Airport Security Chief, who served in this position for years, stood accused of not moving decisively enough against "surveillance equipment" which Hezbollah allegedly installed close to the airport. But the areas around the airport have been Hezbollah strongholds for more than two decades, and hundreds of residential buildings overlook the runways, where people will happily welcome Hezbollah to install just about anything. The phone network has been in place for years, and even if were true that illicit profits are reaped from it – which Hezbollah categorically denies - that hardly seems sufficient reason for the government to provoke conflict and to risk a slide to civil war!

After the Nasrallah speech

Intense armed clashes began throughout the Western part of Beirut, between Hezbollah supporters and Future Movement (pro-government) militias.

One by one, the positions held by government militias fell. By all accounts, it was a rout. Within less than eight hours – fighting only really started in earnest after a speech by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora in the evening – it was all over. Hizbollah and Amal, and their often brutal auxiliaries, took over most of West Beirut, and flushed out most Future movement strongholds.

Friday 9 May

Opposition forces closed the Future Movement TV stations, newspapers and radio stations, in Beirut, and Hezbollah and allies hold most parts of Beirut. Fighting spread from street to street. There are many reports of the Future Movement forces giving up their arms and stopping fighting. By Friday evening, most of Western Beirut is under the direct control of Hezbollah, and many Future Movement militia personnel are apprehended by Hezbollah and handed over to the Lebanese army authorities. The same is done to Jumblatt's forces.

The situation became calmer, as government forces gave up fighting in many areas and the opposition controlled most of Western Beirut.

Saturday 10 May

Smaller fire fights take place all over Beirut and some other parts of Lebanon. By afternoon, the government declared that its two contentious decisions regarding Hezbollah communications and airport surveillance will be put under the 'custody' of the army. The army returns the removed Head of Airport Security to his post, and considers the Hezbollah communication network as an issue to be discussed internally in the army, without any intervention from the government, and taking "into consideration the safety of the resistance leaders". The situation in Beirut is much quieter, after three days of continuous violence.

On Saturday night, vicious fighting erupts in the hills to the South-East of the capital, between pro- and anti-government Druze: antagonists also divided by clan rivalries. In their strongholds around Tripoli, the government militias ignore their leader's call for peace and mete out retribution against the Alawis (an Islamic sect) of Jabl Muhsin, who have the bad luck to adhere to the same religion as the militia's favorite but unreachable enemy, the Syrian regime. In a nearby town, eleven cadres from the opposition Syrian Socialist Party, a right wing, secular nationalist party, are massacred, possibly in retribution for their torching of the Future TV station in Beirut. Jumblatt's men kidnap three Hezbollah fighters and execute two of them, mutilating the bodies. Clashes keep flaring up on and around the two main roads leading to Syria.

Sunday 11 May

Huge gun fights erupt in Mount Lebanon (a cross confessional area that has big Druze and Christians populations, and a small minority of Shiite) between the opposition militias and Jumblatt's forces. There is the ominous growling noise of missiles, all afternoon. Jumblatt orders his militias to stand down and to hand over their arsenal to the army, ending a very long and bloody weekend (nobody has worked since last Wednesday). The airport remains closed, as are the roads to Syria and the port.

Hezbollah and Amal, have, in fact, largely withdrawn, leaving the army to control the streets. Press Agencies, however, insist on making false statements, claiming: "Beirut is in the grip of fear and chaos" as bearded fundamentalist militias roam the streets.

In fact, on the one day Hezbollah militias did roam the streets of the city, what reigned for most people was 'relief' – that the fighting was over, and that the Hezbollah, frightening as they may have looked to some, by and large, acted with discipline, as did even the Amal fighters (from the opposition Shiite party), who do not have a reputation for such behavior.

Pro-government held (illegally) weapons, used by government parties who have been loudly talking about 'state sovereignty' for the past three years, are handed over to the Lebanese army. It is only weapons and military positions of the pro-government parties who relinquished to the army. Hezbollah and Amal voluntarily withdrew from the streets, while the pro-government militias surrendered.

New balance of forces

The balance of forces in Lebanon is changed. The prime minister, more than ever, is reduced to little more than a janitor at government HQ. So devastating was the defeat, the government felt compelled to deny that a battle ever took place! Its spokespeople claim that only a few "unprotected citizen defended their houses" – with automatic weapons, and rocket-propelled grenades - weaponry we all store under our beds!

Despite its militias' big setbacks, the Lebanese Siniora government hangs on, propped up by foreign imperialist backing. It appears highly unlikely that things can return to the 'status quo' of the last 18 months - of political attrition between contending forces. We do not yet know what the new balance of power will be or what the rules of the next phase will look like. But one thing is certain; they will be different!

So is the fighting of the last week over? Militarily speaking, and barring outside intervention, the answer is probably yes. The defeat of the government camp has been so complete that there is hardly anything for the opposition militias to fight. The question remains; what does the US want? The power will certainly want to maintain its influence, although it suffered a big blow in recent days. Two days ago, the USS COLE warship was in Lebanese seaways.

The sequence of the events over the last week shows that each and every political party in Lebanon is organized for war. All the political parties use religious sectarianism as a base of support. The Lebanese Communist Party, though armed like all other parties (but definitely much less than other parties), was not involved in the recent armed conflicts. In press releases, the CP focused on emphasizing the failure of the system. However, the CP is not a key factor on the political map of Lebanon.

The need for a working class party that unites all workers against the ruling class grows everyday. The angry mood over high living costs and huge levels of poverty, while the rich elite get richer, shows the class basis on which a mass working class party can be built. But, as the events of the last few days show, a new working class party needs to adopt bold socialistic policies that can break workers and youth from the

sectarian based political parties. Similarly, the unions need to be developed into fighting, independent masse class organizations, if they are not to be swamped by sectarian and right wing political forces, as we witnessed on 7 May.

We say:

- No to sectarianism and sectarian attacks – For united working class action against the elite!
- Stop the slide to civil war!
- End imperialist meddling! Stop meddling from anti-working class Middle East powers!
- For independent unions and a mass party of the working class!
- For working class unity and socialism!

We call for:

- United working class action, including strikes and mass action, to win higher living standards, stop sectarian attacks and halt the slide towards civil war
- Anti-sectarian committees in the workplaces, colleges, schools and communities, linked on a local, regional and national basis
- Democratic and cross confessional workers' students and community defence to stop sectarian attacks

We demand:

- A minimum wage of a one million Lira
- Properly funded and free state education
- Decent funding to hospitals for free health services
- Affordable power and energy sources
- A national economic plan to benefit all working people
- Workers' unity on a class programme to end war and poverty
- Democratic fighting trade unions
- For the building of strong mass workers' socialist parties
- Solidarity with workers in Egypt and the region to unite the struggle against neo-liberalism