The Bombing of Beirut, 12 August 1982: Eleven Hours of Fire and a "Holocaust"



An Israeli occupation air raid on the Sports City in Beirut in 1982. Source: Palestinian Museum Digital Archive, described by WAFA photojournalist Yousef al-Qutob.

On Thursday 12 August 1982, with the negotiations over the fighters' departure from Beirut in their final stage, the Israeli occupation army unleashed on West Beirut its heaviest sustained air bombardment since the invasion began. From dawn until five in the afternoon, some 11 hours, its aircraft struck the camps and residential districts in more than a hundred sorties, dropping phosphorus, fragmentation and 2,000-pound bombs, after continuous artillery fire that had begun the previous day. [1][2]

Lebanese police put the toll at 128 dead and more than 400 wounded; Berbir Hospital took a direct hit; and the PLO said more than 400 buildings had been completely destroyed by noon. The bombing stopped only after King Fahd telephoned US President Ronald Reagan, who in turn called Menachem Begin and told him that what was happening was a "holocaust." Some foreign sources call these raids "Black Thursday." This article is part of a series on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the 1982 siege of Beirut. [1][2][3]

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The day at a glance

Item	Details
Date	Thursday 12 August 1982, after continuous artillery fire since Wednesday 11 August
Duration	About 11 hours of air raids, from dawn until five in the afternoon
Scale according to the PLO	More than 100 sorties, about 12 an hour
Weapons	Phosphorus, fragmentation and 2,000-pound bombs and rockets, with land and sea bombardment
Areas targeted	The camps of Burj al-Barajneh, Sabra, Shatila, Bir Hassan and Mar Elias, and the districts of Verdun, Tallat al-Khayyat, Aisha Bakkar, Manara, Ramlet al-Baida and the southern suburbs
Toll according to Lebanese police	128 dead and more than 400 wounded
Destruction according to the PLO	More than 400 buildings completely destroyed by noon
Outcome	Bombing halted at 5 p.m. after Saudi and US pressure; Security Council Resolution 518

Sources: [1][2][4]

On the brink of agreement

After failing to storm West Beirut through the Museum gate on 4 August, the occupation returned to the airport and Museum axes between 8 and 10 August; the

fighters hit one of its personnel carriers, killing three soldiers and wounding nine, and there were reports that it used internationally banned weapons. On 9 August it launched an air, sea and land attack on the city just as the logistical details of the fighters' departure were being completed at the Lebanese Defence Ministry. [5][6][7]

The US envoy Philip Habib had cabled Washington that he had agreement in principle from all sides, with only the details of the departure left to arrange. But the continuous artillery fire since Wednesday 11 August made arranging those details impossible, and then Thursday's dawn brought something worse. [3][1]

From dawn until five

The raids began at dawn, and the PLO's messages to the United Nations followed them hour by hour. By 8:30 a.m. the aircraft had carried out more than 25 bombing runs; by 9:00 more than 30 had targeted the camps alone; at 10:45 the bombardment entered its fifth hour and was still escalating; at noon it was in its sixth. [2]

The PLO said the aircraft flew more than a hundred sorties, about 12 an hour, dropping phosphorus bombs, fragmentation bombs, 2,000-pound bombs and several kinds of rockets, while land and naval forces joined the bombardment, until West Beirut had been "turned into a firing range." [2]

The bombardment hit all the Palestinian areas and the Manara district, and spread to Verdun, Tallat al-Khayyat, Aisha Bakkar, Burj Abu Haidar, Barbour, Ramlet al-Baida, the area around Beirut Arab University, Berbir, the Corniche al-Mazraa and the southern suburbs. In the camps, Burj al-Barajneh, Sabra, Shatila, Bir Hassan and Mar Elias, the PLO saw in the raids an attempt "to ensure the total destruction of the last refuge of Beirut's Palestinian citizens." [1][2]

Under the rubble

By noon the PLO said more than 400 buildings had been completely destroyed and that about 300 people had been killed or wounded across sixteen residential

districts and camps in nine hours. It warned that the toll would rise, because most of the victims were trapped or buried under the rubble and in the shelters, while the intensity of the raids was blocking rescue work. [2]

In the evening Lebanese police put the toll at 128 dead and more than 400 wounded. Berbir Hospital took a direct hit after heavy shelling, the same hospital that had already lost three-quarters of its staff to earlier shelling, and a Lebanese police unit was also hit. [1][8]

The weapons rained on the city all summer left wounds of a particular kind. White phosphorus burned flesh to the bone, and in many of the cases that reached Palestine Red Crescent hospitals the burns covered at least 80% of the body; cluster bombs scattered thousands of fragments, until amputations became so common that doctors called them “Begin amputations.” [9]

“Go home”

The Lebanese authorities announced the suspension of the negotiations in protest at the bombardment. Saeb Salam told the US envoy Philip Habib to “go home” and held the United States responsible for the occupation’s raids. Prime Minister Shafik al-Wazzan refused to negotiate under bombardment and was reported to have resigned, though he went on performing his duties. [1]

In Washington, Habib cabled that the bombardment was preventing him from arranging the details of the departure, and fears grew that his mission would collapse altogether, after weeks of negotiations in which air raids had been the occupation’s tool for pressuring both the besieged and the negotiators. [3][1][7]

“Holocaust”: how the bombing stopped

King Fahd bin Abdulaziz telephoned US President Ronald Reagan and pleaded with him to do something, and Reagan told him he would call Begin at once. Reagan wrote in his diary that the occupation had carried out “the most devastating bomb & artillery attack on W. Beirut,” and that he was angry when he called Begin and

told him the fighting had to stop or the entire relationship between the two countries was at risk. [1][3]

Reagan wrote that he used the word “holocaust” deliberately and reminded Begin of the picture of a seven-month-old baby whose arms had been blown off, the kind of images that, he said, Americans were seeing on their television screens night after night. About twenty minutes later Begin called back to tell him he had ordered the bombardment stopped. [3][10]

In an official statement the White House said the President had been “shocked” to learn of the new, heavy Israeli bombardment of West Beirut and had expressed to Begin his “outrage” over this latest round of massive military action, which had halted Habib’s negotiations just as they were close to success, with the result of “more needless destruction and bloodshed.” [11]

At five in the afternoon the occupation army declared a ceasefire, ending the heaviest sustained air raids on Beirut since the invasion began. After a confrontation with Sharon, the occupation cabinet decided to halt the bombardment of West Beirut and to curb his authority to order strikes. [1]

Resolution 518

That same day the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 518, which demanded that Israel and all parties to the conflict strictly observe an immediate halt to all military activity in Lebanon, particularly in and around Beirut, and that all restrictions on the city be lifted immediately so that supplies could reach its civilian population freely; it also demanded the occupation’s full cooperation in deploying UN observers. [4][1]

After 12 August

The raids of 12 August were the last great bombardment of the siege. On 19 August the occupation government approved the departure plan and the Lebanese government formally asked the United States, France and Italy to send troops, and

at dawn on 21 August the fighters began leaving from Beirut port. They left with their personal weapons, after a siege in which the region’s most powerful army had been unable to storm the city. [12][13][5]

Differences between the accounts

The Palestine Chronology puts the raids at 11 hours, while Reagan wrote in his diary that the attack lasted 14, a difference probably explained by counting the artillery fire that preceded the raids; the PLO letter speaks of nine continuous hours up to the time it was written. As for casualties, the Lebanese police figure of 128 dead and more than 400 wounded covers the whole day, while the PLO estimated about 300 killed and wounded by noon and warned that many were still under the rubble. [1][3][2]

Some foreign sources know this day as “Black Thursday,” but in Lebanon the same name refers to a different event dating from 1975, so this article calls it by its date: the bombing of 12 August 1982.

Timeline

Date	Event
4 August 1982	The storming of West Beirut fails at the battle of the Museum [5]
8–10 August	Battles at the airport and reports of banned weapons [6]
9 August	Air, sea and land attack; logistics of the departure completed [7]
11 August	Continuous artillery fire on West Beirut begins [1]
Dawn, 12 August	The air raids begin [2]
12 August, 8:30–9:00	More than 25 bombing runs, 30 of them on the camps [2]
Noon, 12 August	More than 400 buildings destroyed according to the PLO [2]
12 August	Negotiations suspended; King Fahd calls Reagan; Reagan calls Begin [1]

Date	Event
12 August, 5 p.m.	Bombing halted; the occupation cabinet curbs Sharon’s authority [1]
12 August	The Security Council adopts Resolution 518 [4]
19 August	The occupation government approves the departure plan [12]
21 August	The fighters begin leaving from Beirut port [13]

Frequently asked questions about the bombing of Beirut on 12 August 1982

What happened in Beirut on 12 August 1982?

The occupation launched its heaviest sustained air bombardment of West Beirut since the invasion began, lasting about 11 hours from dawn until five in the afternoon. [1]

How many were killed on 12 August?

128 dead and more than 400 wounded according to Lebanese police; the PLO said more than 400 buildings had been destroyed by noon. [1][2]

What weapons were used?

Phosphorus, fragmentation and 2,000-pound bombs and several kinds of rockets, alongside artillery and naval fire. [2]

How did the bombing stop?

King Fahd called Reagan, Reagan called Begin and described what was happening as a “holocaust,” and the occupation halted the bombing at five in the afternoon. [1][3]

What was Lebanon’s official stance?

The Lebanese authorities suspended the negotiations in protest, Saeb Salam told Habib to “go home,” and Wazzan refused to negotiate under bombardment. [1]

What did the Security Council decide?

It adopted Resolution 518 on 12 August 1982, demanding a halt to all military activity in Beirut, the lifting of restrictions on the city and cooperation with UN observers. [4]

Why does this article not call it “Black Thursday”?

Because in Lebanon the name refers to a different event in 1975, so the article calls the day by its date. [[]]

Read also on Palestinuna

- The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon
- Shatila camp
- Burj al-Barajneh camp
- Battles archive

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