

Israeli Offers On-the-Ground Perspective of Hamas Conflict

There are no shortage of Internet and other sources available to get up to date information on the violence that has erupted in Israel with a barrage of hundreds of rockets fired just in the past day, marking several hundred in the past week or so.

I'd like to share a few points from a personal perspective, based on observations and feelings the past day, a firsthand view of how Israelis are getting by. Please feel free to share this with others.

All day Thursday, and starting early Friday morning, TV and radio broadcasts were interrupted by regular "Code Red" air raid announcements. These interrupted the ongoing broadcasts with announcements telling citizens that warning sirens have been heard at that moment in as many as several locations, and urging residents there to get to their protected rooms or bomb shelters.

In some cases, Israelis only have 15 seconds from the sound of the warning to the possible explosion. Fifteen seconds is not a very long time. In some cases, it takes close to 15 seconds to read all the names of places where the "Code Red" siren is being sounded. Thirty seconds is not much better.

This all was reminiscent of the 2006 Lebanon war when regular TV and radio broadcasts interrupted by these reports, except that during the monthlong Lebanon War the programming that was interrupted was often about mundane things. This week, the reports being interrupted are all about the conflict, often with in the middle of an interview or live report with a resident in some town, and then a notice that there is a "Code Red" air raid warning in that town.

Heightening the importance of the reporting of the unfolding

conflict, one of the most popular national rush-hour morning radio hosts was put on air in the evening, bringing his prestige and also a level of comfort in his veteran broadcasting.

While the unfolding violence is deeply disturbing, with three Israelis killed and reports of dozens injured, it's inspiring to see Israelis uniting, coming together in a way that underscores that no matter where we live, we are all in this together. This has played out in many ways, most notably national youth groups rearranging their annual festivities to include kids from southern communities who can't gather for these activities at home where it's not safe.

With Shabbat upon us, Israeli families out of range from the current barrage of Gaza rockets are inviting others who are in range to live with them, at least for Shabbat. We are trying to find people looking for a safe place to stay, whether for a restful Shabbat or longer as needed.

Schools within 40 km (or about 25 miles) of the Gaza border have been closed. This is to prevent a tragedy of a school filled with kids getting hit by a rocket, but creates extra stresses with kids at home and air raid warnings all the time, yet they're not being able to leave their homes or be out of range of their own bomb shelters.

For parents, it's a no-win situation because they either leave their kids at home alone and go to work, or stay home and miss work. Each time I hear reports of another air raid warning, my heart goes out for the residents, particularly the kids, with the hope that they are safe physically and strong emotionally.

A meeting Thursday took me to the center of the country where I was aware of the fact that I could have been driving into, or toward, the range of the Gaza rockets. As I was driving, in a 12 km stretch of Israel's Route 6 highway, I witnessed at

least 12 military vehicles driving the opposite direction, south toward the conflict. Four were armored personnel carriers.

Until now, Israel's military strikes have been surgically precise, targeting terrorist leaders, people in the midst of firing rockets, places where we know that weapons are being stored, etc. Yet, the IDF is certainly preparing for the eventuality of a deeper conflict that scares and concerns us all.

This year, having lived in Israel longer and having more friends with kids in the army, the situation is more personal. Friends' kids, and my own kids' friends, are being relocated with their military units to the south, and reserve units are being called up. Vacations and other leaves are being shortened and canceled. I have heard three stories of young men about to be married next week being called into active service. The stresses are profound. Weddings and other celebrations that have been planned within the 40 km range of Gaza are in question and have to be postponed or relocated.

On the way to my final meeting of the day, reports of air raid warnings reached as far north as Rishon LeZion, a major city outside Tel Aviv. The reports were that this was a first, and reporters flocked to interview residents, increasing the total number of people living within range, beyond the 40 km, by at least 10 percent—as much as 15 percent of Israel's population is now in range of Gaza's terrorists.

In the midst of my last meeting of the day, at Tel Aviv's David Intercontinental hotel, I experienced the surreal feeling of the residents of the south when my meeting was interrupted by an air raid siren—In Tel Aviv! People flocked to the stairs to go down to a well-outfitted bomb shelter including hotel guests—some who had not even checked in—business people and guests at a party. The hotel staff did an extraordinary job keeping people calm, though there was no

shortage of people who were visibly worried and stressed.

While created to depict the threat Israel could face, the video *Can't Ignore the Risks* may have been prophetic. But sadly, as it was being produced, most people I know thought that something like what's happening now was inevitable. The question is what will be.

Let it be clear however, what's happening in Israel and Gaza are worlds apart. I am proud of our military and government leaders for targeting the terrorist leaders, weapons storage and other active combatants. On the other side, the terrorists are firing rockets at us indiscriminately, looking to create the widest amount of death and destruction.

Driving home last night, after a long day, radio broadcasts were still interrupted by air raid warnings. I took time to process the day's events. Part of me feels like I felt after Sept. 11, 2001. All of me hopes and prays that this will not escalate. And I took note to think how stressful one air raid siren I experienced personally was to me, and reflected on the more than 1 million Israelis who live with that as their norm this week.

And finally, I paused to think how professionally, the work of Heart to Heart to support and sustain Israel's national blood services is simply vital. As one person said to me in a call from the U.S. to offer support and solidarity, "This is exactly what Heart to Heart is all about."

All partners and supporters should feel pride in knowing that their support provides resources to make it possible to protect and sustain Israel's blood supply, and treat any of the dozens of victims who have been injured and require blood to save their lives. Given the violence, the need is greater, but given the constant barrage of hundreds of rockets, it's not possible to arrange blood collection within the range of the rockets in order not to put people in harm's way.