

Tackle Hezbollah with a cease-fire, postwar strategy

**Washington, D.C.** - The following Op-Ed by Congressman David Price (NC-04) was printed in the August 8, 2006 edition of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

The strategic interests of the United States and Israel are inextricably linked to the fate of the pro-democracy reform movement in Lebanon, which offers Israel its best hope for peace on its northern border and gives democracy a foothold on the doorstep of the Arab world. The current crisis has left this movement in grave danger.

It is critical for our interests in the Middle East that we press both Israel and Lebanon for an immediate cease-fire, and that we follow such an agreement with intensive diplomacy toward a comprehensive political settlement. The escalating Israeli offensive is destroying Lebanon's infrastructure and increasing popular support for extremist elements, yet U.S. and Israeli interests require a stronger, not weaker, Lebanon. A cease-fire would serve as a starting point for diplomatic engagement to disarm Hezbollah, establish an international security force in southern Lebanon, return kidnapped soldiers, and provide assurances that Israel will not be vulnerable to continued cross-border attacks.

But we must look beyond the immediate crisis to an equally urgent question: What will Lebanon look like after the dust settles?

President Bush has repeatedly touted his commitment to spreading democracy in the Middle East; yet his inaction in the current crisis and his failure to follow last year's Cedar Revolution with sustained support have left Lebanon, the only democracy other than Israel in this pivotal region, teetering on the brink.

We cannot allow Lebanon's democracy to become a casualty of war. The prospects for its survival depend largely on how key players — especially the United States — engage the Lebanese government as the conflict's resolution is negotiated. As negotiations proceed, the Bush administration must take special pains to support reformers, or it risks allowing Hezbollah and anti-Western extremists to emerge emboldened and empowered.

First, the administration, in concert with other key actors in the international community, must empower Lebanon's reformist Prime Minister Fouad Siniora by giving him a key role in negotiations on the political settlement. Siniora is a proven advocate for democracy and an important bulwark against Lebanese President Emile Lahoud and other pro-Syrian leaders. U.S. negotiators must make sure Siniora leaves the negotiating table with tangible victories that will bolster his political stature at home.

Second, Lebanon will need a substantial assistance package for reconstruction in the conflict's aftermath. Bush must commit to providing substantial U.S. support that empowers Siniora to deliver much-needed assistance to his people.

Third, the administration must elevate pressure on key political actors in Lebanon to condition their dealings with Hezbollah political representatives on Hezbollah's renunciation of violence. For example, Gen. Michel Aoun, leader of a major Christian faction in the Lebanese Parliament, must break his alliance with Hezbollah's 15 members of parliament. Hezbollah has tried to have it both ways, with one foot in the political arena and one foot on the battlefield; ultimately it must choose between these paths. By isolating it in the political arena, Aoun and others can force Hezbollah to make this existential choice.

Fourth, it is hard to imagine a resolution of which Syria is not a part. It is critical that Syria establish diplomatic relations with the Lebanese government, thus formally recognizing it as an independent, sovereign nation. Securing full Syrian compliance with U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559 is also a major challenge for our diplomacy. Ultimately, Syria must be shown the way back to negotiations for the return of the Golan Heights, which came so close to fruition in 2000.

Finally, our nation must make a sustained commitment to strengthening the reformist direction of the Lebanese Parliament. The House Democracy Assistance Commission, on which I serve as ranking Democratic member, has already established a partnership with the Lebanese Parliament. We initiated our assistance program with a mission to Beirut only three weeks ago, and our work will continue. The administration must magnify our work with a significant, long-term commitment to the development of democratic institutions in Lebanon, including an independent and effective legislative branch. Democracy alone is not sufficient; Lebanon needs a strong and responsive government to protect its interests and serve its people.

The Bush administration must recognize that it has a stark choice. It can use negotiations to hand victories to the reform movement in Lebanon, giving democracy hope to survive, or it can impose a resolution that weakens and delegitimizes the Lebanese government, leaving Hezbollah to exploit resentments and re-emerge. The president's choice could determine the success of his commitment toward spreading democracy in the Middle East for generations to come.

U.S. Rep. David Price (D-N.C.) is the ranking Democrat on the House Democracy Assistance Commission, which had been working with pro-democracy reformers in Lebanon's Parliament to strengthen that institution.