

CANADIAN DEAD END IN SOUTH LEBANON STORY:



In the summer of 2006, Ali Al-Akhrass, a 35-year-old owner of a large Jean Coutu Pharmacy in Montreal and his 24-year-old wife Amira took their four children on a vacation to Lebanon. The Al-Akhrass family was looking forward to meeting with loved ones and sipping mint tea on balconies overlooking the endless green fields. Above all, the Canadian couple was looking forward to watching their four children indulge in the flavours, sounds and warmth of their ancestral home. Instead, two weeks into their visit, the Al-Akhrass family vacation turned into a devastating tragedy.



Ahmad, Saya, and Zeinab Al-Akhrass preparing to go trick-or-treating in Montreal on Halloween, 2004. All three Canadian children were senselessly killed on July 15th, when Israel dropped a bomb on the village home where their family had sought refuge from the fighting.

A Fairytale Summer Vacation

The story began when Ali's parents – both Canadians from Montreal, had completed building a beautiful summer home on the outskirts of their ancestral village in Aytaroun and invited Ali, Amira and the four grandchildren to join them for the summer. This was not an uncommon practice. The village of Aytaroun



Ali (35), Amira (24) and their four children: victims of Israel's bombing of a family home in Lebanon on July 15th. Ali survived the initial attack, but his evacuation to Beirut was prevented as Israel fired on his ambulance.

doubles its population during the hot summer months as friends and loved ones come from around the world to linger in its cafes and bask in its warmth. No one in the village predicted the speed, ferocity and recklessness of Israel's actions following the capture of two of its soldiers on July 12th.

There had been skirmishes between Hizbollah and Israel in the past but no escalation could be measured to what happened in July 2006. Family and friends of the Al-Akhrass family insist that there was never any presence of Hizbollah militants in or around their homes. Hizbollah militants typically operated at least 2 km. away from the outskirts of the

village, leading residents to believe they would be safe from harm.

When Israel began its military campaign on July 12th, the Canadian family feared that their summer home was too far on the outskirts of the village and might be accidentally hit. To be safe, the Al-Akhrass family decided to move to Ali's grandfather's home nestled in the center of the bustling village. At this early stage in the Destruction of Lebanon, no one in the village imagined that Israel would actually target civilian homes. Being in a house near the center of the village, surrounded by other village homes seemed like a safe bet to Ali and his family.

On Saturday, July 15th between 6 and 7 p.m., Ali's grandfather's home – one they hoped would be a safe haven – was bombed. According to witnesses, a low-flying Israeli plane dropped a rocket right into the Al-Akhrass house instantly killing eleven members of the Al-Akhrass family, including seven of the Canadian-Lebanese who were vacationing there. The Israeli rocket created a large crater where the house once stood. Witnesses later found the body parts of Ali's wife and children torn and dispersed around the site. Ongoing presence of Israeli warplanes in the sky delayed the neighbour's efforts to search and care for survivors. In a subsequent field report, Human Rights Watch determined that there was no Hizbollah activity anywhere in the area at the time of the attack.

A neighbour described the assault to Human Rights Watch “When we tried to save them, a helicopter would appear in the sky and a warplane would fly around. So we got scared and stayed away. We recovered between six and eight bodies, but were told there may be more, and they were all in pieces.”

The Medical Evacuation that wasn't

Ali, who was on the main floor of the house at the time, survived the initial rocket attack. He suffered serious injuries on his arms, stomach and face. When help finally arrived, Ali and another family member were carried off in an ambulance to Bint Jbeil, about 3 km. away from the village.

Because of the seriousness of Ali's injuries, Doctors in the small Bint Jbeil hospital lacked the sophisticated equipment needed to save him. Ali was quickly put back into an ambulance to be immediately transported to a hospital in Beirut. However, minutes after the clearly marked ambulance left the Bint Jbeil hospital, it came under Israeli fire. Although Israel was repeatedly asked to provide a safe passage for residents and medics from south Lebanon to Beirut, it never did. The ambulance was forced to turn back and wait.

Intensive shelling continued through the night. The next morning, a second attempt was made to get Ali to the hospital in Beirut. Normally, the trip from Bint Jbeil to Beirut takes less than two hours. However, on Sunday July 16, due to Israel's extensive destruction of Lebanon's main roads and bridges it took the ambulance more than 6 hours to drive through back roads before finally arriving at the hospital in Beirut. The efforts to save Ali took too long – he died upon arrival at the hospital.

In all, twelve members of the Al-Akhrass family were killed, including eight Canadians: Ali, his mom, his family, and an uncle. While the Al-Akhrass family's fate is horribly tragic in and of itself, it is only made more repulsive by the fact that it could have been avoided through Canadian and international insistence for an immediate cease fire. Unfortunately, with the current uneasy cease fire and unresolved regional injustices, it is not clear that other tragedies do not await those in south Lebanon, whether visiting Canadians or native Lebanese.

Special thanks to Hassan Al-Akhrass of Montreal, who lost his father in the tragedy.



Salam Al-Akhrass, shown in her birthday dress, celebrated her one-year birthday not long before the family went to Lebanon.