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Emerging From the Rubble in Lebanon

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By Vadim Nikitin

Katya and Salim Hubeidi were about to get into bed Monday night, having weathered the Israeli barrage of their hometown in south Lebanon, when their third-floor apartment began shaking. They immediately fled outside.

"We saw the whole building just keel over and crumble, like in an earthquake," Salim Hubeidi said. "Now we have lost everything."

The Hubeidis were among several Russian families that opted not to evacuate Lebanon at the start of the monthlong war between Israel and the militant group Hezbollah, hoping the conflict would end quickly.

Salim now regrets the decision. "We kept thinking, 'It will end any day now, and if we leave we will lose everything,'" he said. "But now we know that, had we gone sooner, maybe we would have managed to salvage something."

With a fragile cease-fire in place, the Russian embassy is airlifting nationals from across the Commonwealth of Independent States out of Lebanon to Cyprus and on to their home countries.

The Hubeidis are uncertain about what to do, torn between an urge to get out of the war-infested Middle East and uncertainty about what awaits them once they touch down in Moscow.

They are typical of the Russians still in Lebanon: In the early 1990s, Salim left Lebanon to study medicine in Moscow. While at school, he met Katya, who was studying to be a nurse. They married, Salim acquired Russian citizenship, and eventually they moved to Lebanon.

When the bombs began to fall last month, hundreds of ethnic Russians who came to the Middle East for work fled Lebanon. The Hubeidis, like other Russian citizens with family ties to the country, weren't so quick. This was their country, after all.

Even though the bombings have now tapered off, war, destruction, the possibility of instant death continues to absorb the minds of those seeking to rebuild their homes.

"The last two days [before the cease-fire Monday] had been absolute hell, a nightmare," said Wahid Saliami, also a Russian citizen and a doctor, who sent his family back to Russia but decided to stay behind to help with the cleanup.

Saliami, a surgeon, said he was operating on Lebanese injured in the war. "I don't know if there has ever been a war of such devastation, not even the Second World War," Saliami said.

Katya Hubeidi said, "We wake up many times in the night, and our smallest child cries every time she hears the door shut."

For now, the Hubeidis and their kids -- Ruslan, 16, and Fatima, 9 -- are staying with Salim's parents at the orchard where his parents work. Life is made more difficult by the fact that Katya, from Igorsk, in the Moscow region, does not feel accepted by Salim's family. Worse yet, Ruslan is not Salim's son, though Salim thinks of the boy as if he were his own.

The trauma of the last four weeks has left both Salim and Katya angry and disoriented. "It felt as if Israel had surplus weapons that it was trying to use up," Salim said. "We would sleep with IDs in our pockets, around our necks, so that if we were killed our bodies could at least be identified. We said goodbye to each other many times each day."

Katya recalled nights of terror, endless bombing raids, her children being bitten by rats, hunger and hopelessness.

Salim observed: "When a building is hit by a bomb, it is not smashed to pieces. Instead, it is entirely lifted in the air, then falls and compresses like a sandwich. Shock waves send people flying through the air, like Superman."

He sounded perplexed by the seemingly absurd day-to-day struggle. "Every day, a plane comes and bombs, and then rockets are launched from the mountains into Israel, and then 20 minutes later another plane comes and bombs. Every day, it is the same."

Now, the Hubeidis and other Russians in Lebanon must decide where to go.

The embassy is advising them to leave on a flight Wednesday. Vladimir Cherepanov, an embassy spokesman in Beirut, stressed that south Lebanon remained a dangerous place. He noted that Hezbollah had pledged to fight any Israeli soldier still on Lebanese soil. Israel, for its part, has refused to lift the air and sea blockade and the curfew south of the strategic Litani River.

What's more, anyone with Russian citizenship gets to fly to Moscow for free, Cherepanov said. Other CIS nationals also can fly for free to Cyprus, but they must pay for their flight from Cyprus to their home countries unless it is operated by the Russian Emergency Situations Ministry.

Still, Katya has her doubts about leaving. "They want to be able to say that they evacuated all the Russians from Lebanon," she said of the embassy staff. "But what will happen to us after that? It's not in their jurisdiction. ... If only there were some certainty of a roof over our heads." As of Tuesday night, the Hubeidis had not made up their minds whether to leave Wednesday.