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MIDDLE EAST



SLA militia men await sentences for collaboration

FROM NICHOLAS BLANFORD IN BEIRUT

SHAME-FACED and sombre, former members of the South Lebanon Army (SLA) militia stood in the dock of Beirut's military court yesterday, waiting with resignation for sentence to be passed.

The prisoners were crammed into the dock, still wearing the same clothes they surrendered in a month ago when Israel pulled out of south Lebanon's occupied zone and left their former allies to fend for themselves.

All the former members of Israel's proxy army looked tired and nervous. One elderly man rested his head in his hands and prayed silently. Another cast a bewildered eye at the soldiers and gowned lawyers who filled the courtroom.

The guilt evident in the courtroom was a far cry from the defiant rhetoric of many militia men. Then, many of those standing trial had been on Israel's payroll, manning checkpoints along the South Lebanon border zone occupied by Israel for 22 years.

Then they had vowed to continue defending their homes against their enemies in the Hezbollah organisation. But the rhetoric proved empty when, in the space of two days, Israel's occupation collapsed as hundreds of former residents of the area and fighters from Hezbollah surged into the border enclave.

As armed Hezbollah fighters advanced on the last occupied villages, up to 7,000 Christian and Druze militia men and their families crossed the border into Israel to escape what they feared would be bloody

<http://www.the-times.co.uk/news/pages/tim/2000/06/22/timfgnmid01003.html>



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revenge from their Shia Muslim enemy.

The bulk of the 2,200 militia men standing trial, however, are Shia Muslims who chose to hand themselves into the Lebanese authorities rather than spend a life in exile.

As their names were called out, the prisoners, aged from the late teens to early sixties, filed into the dock and were marshalled before Brigadier Maher Safieddine, the presiding judge of the military tribunal. Each man was questioned on his activities in the SLA.

Most of them professed to have had minor roles. "I was a cook. I never fired a gun," said one defendant.

Few of them shared any ideological sympathy with the SLA but joined to earn a regular income in the cash-strapped border enclave. Others were press-ganged into serving for the SLA.

So far around 250 former militia men have stood trial, with sentences generally ranging between a few months and five years in prison.

The stiffest sentence was handed down to a former SLA guard at the notorious Kham prison. He received 15 years hard labour.

The Lebanese Government has sought to strike a balance between appeasing Hezbollah by punishing collaborators while ensuring that the terms of imprisonment are not unduly severe for minor offenders.

Chibli Mallat, a professor of law in Beirut, said: "There are many people who have collaborated much more closely with Israel in the past who have escaped any retribution."

Outside the court, families scanned hand-written lists of names of former militia men, attempting to discover in which prison their detained relatives were being held and when they would stand trial.

Deebi Humayed, from the Shia Muslim village of Beit Leef in south Lebanon, said that her two sons had been forced to join the SLA.

"The militia said that they would destroy our house if they didn't work for them," she said, adding: "One of them was only in the militia for two months. He should not have to stand trial."

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