

**Floor Statement of Senator Dick Durbin
Lebanese Temporary Protected Status Act of 2006
July 31, 2006**

Mr. President, I rise today to introduce the Lebanese Temporary Protected Status Act of 2006.

I thank Senator John Sununu, a Republican from New Hampshire, and Senator Russ Feingold, a Democrat from Wisconsin, for joining me as original cosponsors of this bipartisan legislation.

I come to the floor today with a heavy heart. The attacks by the terrorist organization Hezbollah against the State of Israel have led to ongoing hostilities in the Middle East. The hostilities have already cost many innocent Israeli and Lebanese lives, but yesterday was a particularly tragic day. This morning, as I woke up in Springfield, IL, and pulled up the local newspapers. There on the front page of the Chicago Tribune was a heartbreaking photograph of a Lebanese aid worker carrying the lifeless body of a child out of the rubble from the events of yesterday. Over 50 innocent Lebanese civilians, including dozens of children, perished in the southern Lebanese town of Qana.

I join my colleagues and all Americans in offering my heartfelt condolences to Prime Minister Siniora and to the people of Lebanon on the loss of these innocent lives. The victims and their families are in our thoughts and prayers.

Lives have been lost on both sides of the border, but we know it is particularly dangerous at this moment in Lebanon.

In reflecting on the deaths of hundreds of innocent civilians in recent weeks, Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora asked, "Is the value of human life less in Lebanon than that of citizens elsewhere? Are we children of a lesser God?"

The Lebanese people are not children of a lesser God. We are all children of the same God and we are all equal in God's eyes. Christians, Jews, and Muslims - we are all children of Abraham. We mourn the loss of every innocent life lost in the Israeli-Arab conflict, whether Israeli, Palestinian, or Lebanese.

Enacting the Lebanese Temporary Protected Status Act of 2006 is a modest, but important, step that will help alleviate the suffering of innocent Lebanese people. This legislation would make Lebanese nationals who are currently residing in the United States eligible for temporary protected status for an initial 12-month period.

Temporary protected status allows nationals of another country who are visiting the United States to remain here temporarily if returning to their country would pose a serious threat to their personal safety. Tragically, Lebanon faces just such a situation today.

There is an ongoing urgent humanitarian crisis in Lebanon. The United Nations estimates that 700,000 people have been displaced from their homes, almost 20 percent of the population of that nation. According to Catholic Relief Services, “Many of those who have been displaced have taken refuge in mosques, churches and schools. The stocks of basic food and relief items, including much needed medicines, are dwindling.”

The U.N. has said:

There has been widespread damage to infrastructure with hospitals, schools, roads, bridges, fuel storage depots, airports and seaports sustaining damage. This, of course, has severe implications on the ability to deliver humanitarian assistance to those most in need. In addition, prices of even basic necessities have skyrocketed.

U.N. emergency relief coordinator Jan Egeland has called the crisis, “The hour of greatest need for the Lebanese people.”

Think of the images of thousands of frightened Americans trying desperately to escape the violence in Lebanon. Thankfully, many who have sought to escape have managed to do so. Unfortunately, unknown numbers of Americans still remain trapped.

Many Americans traveled to Lebanon this summer to spend time with relatives. This bipartisan bill would assist Lebanese who have traveled to the United States for similar reasons. They might have come here to visit family, to study, or to work. Now they face the prospect of being told they must return to this war zone. If conditions in Lebanon are so unsafe that we were forced to evacuate American citizens, innocent Lebanese who are visiting in the United States should be permitted to remain here until conditions in Lebanon improve.

Granting temporary protected status to Lebanese nationals who are currently in the United States is consistent with America's national interest.

At this delicate moment in relations between the United States and the Middle East, giving temporary protected status to Lebanon will send a positive signal about United States concern for the suffering of innocent Lebanese civilians.

Granting temporary protected status would also assist the fragile Lebanese Government by delaying the return of thousands of people who might be unable to return to their homes and would find themselves arriving back in their country only to become refugees.

The efforts of Prime Minister Siniora and millions of other Lebanese to build a sovereign and democratic Lebanon deserve the respect and continued support of the United States. Granting temporary protected status to Lebanese citizens now in the United States would take the pressure off their Government as it struggles to meet its many new challenges.

This would not be the first time we have done this. The United States extended temporary protected status to the people of Lebanon from March 1991 to March 1993. Before Congress created temporary protected status in 1990, we granted something called extended voluntary departure to provide blanket relief from deportation to Lebanese nationals during the height of the Lebanese civil war.

Granting this type of relief will not endanger our security. The Government can deny or withdraw temporary protected status from any individual who might do harm to our Nation. Individuals convicted of serious crimes who are a threat to national security, such as suspected members of Hezbollah, are automatically ineligible for this status. The Department of Homeland Security may withdraw temporary protected status any time it finds an individual poses any threat to our country. So it isn't a blank check.

Nor is temporary protected status a backdoor to U.S. citizenship. Aliens who are granted this status are not eligible to become legal permanent residents in this country.

Granting this temporary protected status to Lebanon is consistent with American values. The people of Lebanon face a grave humanitarian crisis and we have a tradition in this country of providing safe haven to people in such circumstances.

We must all work to a resolution to the current hostilities that creates lasting peace and security for both Israel and for Lebanon. In the meantime, let us provide a safe haven to Lebanese who are already within the United States while we strive for these larger goals.

I urge my colleagues to support the Lebanese Temporary Protected Status Act of 2006. Mr. President, I yield the floor.