

## Peacekeeping in Lebanon Reminiscences of the First Indian Battalion Group Commander

*Guru Saday Batabyal\**

*If thou hast no sympathy for the troubles of others  
Thou art unworthy to be called by the name of a human.<sup>1</sup>*

This couplet from an old Iranian poem, inscribed at the entrance gate of United Nations (UN) Headquarters (HQ), conveys a message signifying the purpose of the UN. The principal aim of the UN is to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to peace, including actions for suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of peace. The UN peacekeeping attempts to help countries navigate the difficult path from conflict to peace. Chapter VI of the UN Charter deals with peace-making by way of ‘negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlements or other peaceful means’.<sup>2</sup> However, should this pacific settlement of disputes fail, then Chapter VII is invoked, which is ‘peace enforcing’ through authorisation of force by the UN Security Council. Over the years, peacekeeping has undergone changes from ‘Traditional Peacekeeping’ or ‘First Generation

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Peacekeeping Operations' to 'Second Generation Peacekeeping Operations', where internal conflicts emerge as the more problematic issues than international conflicts.<sup>3</sup>

Indian Army's first contribution to a UN assignment was in 1951 during the Korean War. Troops from 16 countries, which included 60 Para Field Ambulance of the Indian Army, constituted the UN multinational force headed by General Douglas MacArthur. After ceasefire on 27 July 1953, the UN set up a Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission and Lieutenant General (Lt Gen) K.S. Thimayya, a distinguished officer of the Indian Army, was appointed its chairman. Simultaneously, the Custodian Force of India, under Major General (Maj Gen) S.P.P. Thorat, displayed compassion, fairness and neutrality and rendered yeoman service, earning the admiration of the whole world. Later, in Lebanon in 1958, to ensure free and fair general elections, an observer group of the UN consisting of 71 officers drawn from India, Norway and Ecuador, headed by Colonel (Col) Ranbir Singh of the Indian Army, was positioned for six months.<sup>4</sup>

The UN peacekeepers have been in Lebanon for the last 44 years due to the unresolved conflict between Lebanon and Israel. It was after the defeat of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Jordan and subsequent relocation of Palestinian armed elements from Jordan to Lebanon in the early 1970s that tension along the Israel–Lebanon border increased. The intensification of PLO operations against Israel led to Israel targeting Palestinian bases in Lebanon. On 11 March 1978, a PLO commando attack in Israel left many dead and wounded. Responding to this ghastly act of terror, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) invaded Lebanon on the night of 14–15 March, quickly occupying the entire southern part of the country except for the city of Tyre. A distressed Lebanese government took the matter to the Security Council, pleading that it had no connection with the Palestinian commando operation. On 19 March, the UN adopted Resolutions 425 (1978) and 426 (1978), and decided on the immediate establishment of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

#### LEBANON: A COUNTRY OF CONQUESTS AND CONFLICT

Lebanon, the land of the biblical Cedars of God,<sup>5</sup> is a country whose forests of cedar offer incredible scenery in winter with their snowcapped trees, where the air is filled with the scent of jasmine. This country, famous for its ancient culture and exotic cuisine, has been frequently visited by

conquerors in the last 5,000 years. Indeed, turmoil and Lebanon are synonymous as the country has remained in conflict in perpetuity for both internal and external reasons. Studying history of Lebanon will help us understand how the complexities and dilemmas of the past have shaped the country and continuing its spell even now.

The ancient civilisation in the coastal cities of Lebanon was termed Phoenicia by the Greeks. Herodotus, a Greek historian, in his magnum opus, *The Histories*, mentions that the Phoenicians 'introduced into Greece upon their arrival a great variety of arts, among the rest that of writing, whereof the Greeks till then had, as I think, been ignorant.'<sup>6</sup> In 539 BCE, the Phoenician cities on the Lebanese coast were conquered by Achaemenid Persia under Cyrus the Great.<sup>7</sup> After two centuries of Persian rule, in 332 BCE, Alexander the Great, during his war against Persia, attacked Tyre, the most prominent Phoenician city of Lebanon. From here, he conquered the remaining landmass of what is now Lebanon.

In the first century, Christianity spread in the coastal plain of Lebanon from neighbouring Galilee. In the late 4th and early 5th centuries, Maron, a hermit, established a Christian monastic tradition near the mountain range of Mount Lebanon; and his followers came to be known as Maronites. The Islamic rule began in Lebanon after the Arab conquest of Levant<sup>8</sup> in 7th century. During the 11<sup>th</sup> century, a new religion named 'Druze' developed out of Islam. The followers of this faith did not identify themselves as Muslims as the Druze religion adopted teachings from other religions besides Islam, like Christianity, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism. Like Hindus they too believed in reincarnation. Many from the southern part of Lebanon became followers of this new faith. Thus, until the modern era, Lebanon was divided between the Maronites and the Druze. As the coastal cities, like Acre, Beirut and others, were directly administered by the Muslim caliphs, the inhabitants of these areas followed Arabic culture.<sup>9</sup>

Also, in 11th century, for about 100 years, Lebanon came under the Latin Christian crusaders, mainly of French origin, beginning with the First Crusade's advance on Jerusalem from Anatolia. Mamluk sultans of Egypt re-established Muslim control in Lebanon in 13th century and later in 16th century Ottoman empire established its authority all over the eastern Mediterranean and then under their rule of Syria included the area of present-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and Palestine.<sup>10</sup>

The 19th century witnessed sectarian conflict in Lebanon. In 1841, conflicts between the Druze and the Maronite Christians escalated,

leading to a massacre of Christians by the Druze at Deir al-Qamar. To establish peace, Ottomans divided Mount Lebanon into two districts, one for Christians and the other for the Druze. However, that could not stop:

civil conflict which included not only the sectarian warfare but a Maronite revolt against the Feudal class, which ended in 1858 with the overthrow of the old feudal system of taxes and levies. The situation was unstable: the Maronites lived in the large towns, but these were often surrounded by poor Druze villages living as *perioikoi*.<sup>11</sup>

The Maronite Catholics and the Druze founded modern Lebanon in the early 18th century, through the ruling and social system known as the 'Maronite-Druze dualism' which developed in Ottoman-era Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate,<sup>12</sup> creating one of the calmest atmospheres that Lebanon had ever lived in. However, modern Lebanon saw full-scale sectarian war in 1860 when the Maronites started opposing the rule of Ottoman Empire. The Druze burned Maronite villages during this sectarian war, killing many Christians. It is not known exactly how many Christians were slaughtered in Lebanon but most sources put the figure between 7,000 to 11,000 and some well over 20,000. The French, who supported the Maronite community, send troops to Lebanon for their protection. With the British backing the Druze, the rift further widened between the two communities.

Over the years, many Lebanese fled the country to escape the hardships. In the ill-fated sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912, a sizable number of the passengers in third class were Lebanese.<sup>13</sup> During the Great Famine of Lebanon from 1915 to 1918—coinciding with the period of World War I—about half the population of Mount Lebanon subdivision, mostly Maronites, starved to death (about 200,000 died). The famine occurred due to crop failure, naval blockade of the coast by the Allies and an Ottoman military ban on exports from Syria into Lebanon during World War I. Consequent to the collapse and disintegration of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, the League of Nations mandated the five provinces that make up present-day Lebanon to the direct control of France, besides Syria, thereby creating the state of Greater Lebanon. British, meanwhile, held the mandate in Palestine. There were territorial readjustments which led to demographic alterations, creating imbalance as the added territory contained people who were predominantly Muslim or Druze.

The French mandate in Greater Syria lasted until 1943, following which two independent countries emerged, Syria and Lebanon. Though Lebanese celebrate 22 November 1943 as independence/national day in commemoration of the end of the French mandate over Lebanon, the region remained under control of the Allies till the end of World War II, with the last of the French troops leaving in 1946. With the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, there was an exodus of Palestinians to Jordan and Lebanon.

In the aftermath of the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, Lebanon became home to more than 1,10,000 Palestinian refugees. Lebanon’s history since independence has been marked by alternating periods of political stability and turmoil interspersed with prosperity built on Beirut’s position as a freely trading regional center for finance and trade. Beirut became a prime location for institutions of international commerce and finance, as well as wealthy tourists, and enjoyed a reputation as the ‘Paris of the Middle East’ until the outbreak of the Civil War.<sup>14</sup>

Geographically, two parallel mountain ranges—one, Mount Lebanon, hugging the Mediterranean coast; and second, Anti-Lebanon Mountains, a southwest–northeast trending mountain range forming most of the border between Syria and Lebanon—separated by a narrow valley, cut the country into vertical strips. These strips were, again, divided by transverse barriers; and within this grid, separate communities had preserved their individualities and mutual hostilities. These were sharpened by religion—Islam and Christianity—and by further divisions within these religions: Sunni, Shia and Druze; and Maronite, Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic (Uniate). The richest group was the Maronite Christians, who also held the presidency, given to them by the constitution and at a time when Christians outnumbered Muslims. The largest of the Muslim communities were the Shias, but the Sunnis, who monopolised the post of prime minister by constitutional right, were more influential politically. The Shia Muslims, who mostly migrated towards the cities, were by far the poorest. On the other hand, the Druze sect that originated in the 11th century had fiercely guarded its distinctiveness, having formed a compact and well-knit society in its mountain homeland, inspired by their much-revered leader Kamal Jumblatt.

Into this delicate cat’s cradle of crisscrossing confessional and economic tensions had come in 1948 refugees from Palestine who, by 1975, numbered about 400,000, mostly housed (an ironic word)

in dreadful camps' from where they recruited militants to augment their fighting strength. Brunt of the Palestinians survival problem had to be borne by the Lebanese. PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) was founded in 1964 and consequent to Arab's defeat in the Six-Day War, in 1967, the PLO commenced fighting Israel as a non-state actor. Within Lebanon many like Maronite Christians regarded Palestinians a ruinous plague, but some section of the population recognized them as fellow Arabs. Inevitably that effected on the relations between Muslims and Christians in Lebanon.<sup>15</sup>

After the influx of Palestinians, Beirut, besides being Lebanon's capital, became the capital of the Palestine movement, particularly with Yasser Arafat's PLO HQ being co-located there. Lebanon had already suffered due to the presence of Palestinians. The PLO struck at Israeli soldiers and civilians alike, and by 1970, Israelis were retaliating deep into Lebanon, always with results quite out of proportion to the original Palestinian attack:

To legitimise their activities in Lebanon, the PLO could point to the 1969 Cairo agreement, a dubious document drawn up in Egypt between Arafat and the Lebanese army commander which permitted any Palestinian in Lebanon 'to participate in the Palestine revolution'...The Lebanese were powerless to control this conflict between Israel—a foreign nation...—and an increasingly strong Palestine army...who now controlled their own camps in Beirut and elsewhere in Lebanon. The Israelis alleged that the Palestinians had created a state within a state, a claim with which few Lebanese would have disagreed.<sup>16</sup>

In 1976, when the civil war in Lebanon intensified, the Syrian Army entered Lebanon at the request of Lebanese President Franjieh. In the meantime, a Lebanese Christian-dominated militia, called the South Lebanese Army (SLA), was founded during the civil war by Major (Maj) Saad Haddad (1977–84), later succeeded by Lt Gen Antoine Lahad (1984–2000), both ex-officers of the Lebanese Army. The SLA was referred to as the De Facto Forces (DFF) by the UN. After 1979, the SLA, supported by Israel, mainly operated in Southern Lebanon and remained its primary ally during the 1985–2000 South Lebanon conflict against Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shia militant Islamist group who had the support of Iran and Syria. The Lebanese government and its supporters called them 'traitors of Lebanon'. The SLA was disbanded in 2000 after the withdrawal of the IDF from most parts of South Lebanon. There was

another organisation which allied with Israel, General Security Service (GSS), a security-related intelligence organisation which, at the behest of SLA, carried out intelligence operations in South Lebanon. Hezbollah was founded by Sayyed Abbas al-Musawi in 1985 with a vow to fight Israel until the end of its occupation of Lebanon. After the death of its founder, the group started functioning under its Secretary-General, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah.<sup>17</sup>

The South Lebanon conflict from 1985 to 2000, involving reciprocal antagonisms between Hezbollah and Israel, had a deep impact on Lebanese internal affairs. The PLO's attack from Lebanon on 11 March 1978 escalated tensions between the two countries, culminating in Israeli invasion of Lebanon on 14 March. In a swift operation code-named 'Operation Litani', the Israeli Army occupied most of the area south of the Litani River. The UN Security Council passed Resolutions 425 (1978) and 426 (1978), calling for ceasefire and immediate Israeli withdrawal, and created the UNIFIL. After the withdrawal of the IDF in 2000, the UN drew a 'Blue Line' demarcating UNIFIL's area of operations. The first UNIFIL troops arrived in the area on 23 March 1978 and the Indian Army joined UNIFIL in November 1998.<sup>18</sup>

#### UNIFIL: AN OVERVIEW

The UN is most visible through its peacekeeping missions, with a large representation engaged for ensuring global peace, security and stability. The UN website highlights:

Over 70 years, peacekeepers have made a tangible difference in the lives of hundreds of millions of the world's most vulnerable people, creating conditions for lasting peace, but a viable political process is central to the work of our operations, as peacekeeping is meant to support and not substitute national efforts...Peacekeeping cannot substitute for the political will and determination of the parties to end the conflict and protect their people, nor the host state's sovereign responsibilities.<sup>19</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, was first deployed in March 1978 after Israel launched 'Operation Litani' earlier in the month, in response to a cross-border raid by PLO based in Lebanon. Initially, Canada, Iran and Sweden contributed troops, with support from France, Nepal and Norway. The initial force, which had 4,000 troops, was increased to 6,000 within a couple of months.

Resolution 425 (1978) established two requirements. First, the Security Council called for strict respect for the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and political independence of Lebanon within its internationally recognized boundaries. Second, the Security Council called upon Israel immediately to cease its military action against Lebanese territorial integrity and withdraw forthwith its forces from all Lebanese territory.<sup>20</sup>

From the beginning, the UNIFIL operations were hindered as the peacekeepers did not have freedom of movement within their area of responsibility. There was visible lack of cooperation by all parties to the conflict, which impacted the peacekeeping efforts. The UNIFIL's actions were, thus, limited to provision of humanitarian aid during the Lebanese Civil War; and it could not make much progress in fulfilling its mandate between 1978 and 1982.<sup>21</sup>

To make peacekeeping work, there were several informal agreements—oral and memorandums of understanding (MoUs)—between the UNIFIL and the IDF (including other Israel-controlled forces) to lay down procedures in Norway Battalion (NORBATT) area of operations of UNIFIL as well as IDF/DFP areas. An MoU was prepared based on the minutes of various meetings and the informal agreement was signed by Lt Gen Lars Eric Wahlgren, Force Commander of UNIFIL, and Maj Gen Yossi Peled, Officer Commanding Northern Command, IDF. The MoU covered various aspects, like freedom of movement, its applicability and procedures for UNIFIL personnel (mainly NORBATT), IDF, SLA/DFP/GSS and civilian residents. Terms of reference in respect to freedom of movement were:

1. The UNIFIL should be able to discharge its duties effectively according to UN Security Council Resolutions 425 and 426, as well as other relevant Security Council resolutions.
2. The IDF will have freedom of movement in NORBATT area of operation, except the deployed positions/locations.
3. Equally, the UNIFIL will have freedom of movement within its area of operation in South Lebanon, except for IDF/DFP positions/locations.
4. The following curfews would apply within NORBATT area of operation: winter: between 2200–0400; and summer: between 2300–0300.

Though this agreement helped UNIFIL to discharge its duties, there were occasional infringements by the IDF/SLA/GSS.



In 2000, to ensure the sanctity of freedom of movement by the UN forces, the border area under the jurisdiction of the troops wearing blue helmets (UN peacekeepers) was demarcated as the Blue Line. The strength and composition of the UNIFIL post-2000 also underwent a number of changes, keeping pace with the security and political situation in Lebanon at the time. A Maritime Task Force was added, including upsizing of troops. In the latter years, Resolutions 1701 (2006), 1773 (2007), 2373 (2017), 2433 (2018) and 2485 (2019) came into effect.

Post the 2006 Lebanon War, ignited by the capture of two IDF soldiers, the UNIFIL was deployed south of Litani River, throughout Southern Lebanon, along the UN Blue Line, in the border between Israel and Lebanon. The aim was to reduce and diffuse tensions along the border by monitoring the military activity between Hezbollah and the IDF. Besides, the UNIFIL played a role in clearing landmines and providing humanitarian assistance to the people of Southern Lebanon. For ensuring peace and assisting in establishing the writ of the Government of Lebanon, the UNIFIL was mandated to have 15,000 personnel to assist the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to deploy in Southern Lebanon.<sup>22</sup> As in November 2021, 9,622 uniformed personnel are deployed for peacekeeping against an authorisation of 13,000 uniformed personnel.<sup>23</sup>

Currently, in accordance with Resolutions 2433 (2018) and 2485 (2019), the LAF and the UNIFIL are focusing on the deployment of the LAF Model Regiment in UNIFIL's area of operation and the development of a strategy for a phased transition of the responsibilities of Maritime Task Force to the Lebanese Navy. In April 2019, the UNIFIL deployed a cultural asset in Lebanon with Blue Shield International to protect world heritage sites. The cultural assets protection team has since completed their task.<sup>24</sup> Based on a considered decision of the UN, the Security Council has called for a speedy and permanent deployment of the LAF in Southern Lebanon and the territorial waters of Lebanon. In addition, the UNIFIL is assisting the LAF to take steps towards the establishment of a 'free area' between the Blue Line and the Litani River. At the request of the Government of Lebanon, the UNIFIL mandate is renewed annually by the Security Council.<sup>25</sup>

Lebanon has been occasionally questioned for its lack of political resolve. In 2020, Ambassador Kelly Craft, representing the Trump administration in the UN, conveyed concern on the Lebanese government's inability to ensure improved access for the UNIFIL and steps to diminish the vast and growing Hezbollah arsenal of weapons.

He insisted on a review of the situation on these lines before extension of the next mandate.<sup>26</sup> There have also been occasional allegations by warring factions in Lebanon about peacekeepers taking side. Kofi Annan emphatically clarified:

A peacekeeping force does not come here with pre-set enemies. There is no enemy inaudible in a peacekeeping force. UNIFIL is a peacekeeping force. It's not an Israeli combat force or an anti-terror force, as they would like it to be. As long as we don't serve their direct interests, they are going to denigrate it as much as they can.<sup>27</sup>

#### REMINISCENCE OF THE FIRST COMMANDING OFFICER (CO) OF THE INDIAN PEACEKEEPING CONTINGENT IN LEBANON

On 9 September 1998, a call came from Director UN Cell, Army HQ, giving us the good news of deployment of the first Indian contingent, 2/4 Gorkha Rifles (GR) Battalion Group, in UNIFIL to relieve the contingent from Norway, which was withdrawing from the mission for good. The message came with a warning period of 45 days. It implied that the preparation of the mission was to be done in the fastest possible mode, with none to guide us with prior experience of the mission area or insight of the operational tasks. In the final composition of the contingent, which came to be known as INDBATT-1, besides my battalion 2/4 GR, there were sub-units from mechanised infantry battalion, field engineer regiment, signal regiment, EME workshop, field hospital, dental section, dog platoon, Remount Veterinary Corps (RVC) team and a few from other services, including an Indian Defence Accounts Service (IDAS) officer. Road to Lebanon was bumpy with many twists and turns. While the preparation for induction was in progress, we faced insuperable challenges. I am recalling a few bewildering and complex odds.

About 4,000 pieces of combat dresses and OG uniforms were to be stitched in the next six to eight weeks. A party under a junior commissioned officer (JCO) was despatched to the factory at Jullundur to get uniform cloth for all, so as to maintain uniformity of shades and colour. However, the unit tailor as well as local tailor shops in Delhi Cantonment expressed their inability to meet the deadline. Our unit tailor dashed to Dehradun and managed about 20 tailors, along with sewing machines, within the next three days. They commenced work on a war footing and after a few days, some more tailors from Punjab joined. Making of uniforms and their delivery was prioritised based on

the phases of induction. To surmount the problem further, it was planned that only two pairs of uniform will be issued ab initio, and the balance will be delivered in the mission area, which will fetch through sea route later. For the heavy stuff, like a plethora of furniture, Canteen Stores Depot (CSD), reserve ration and ammunition, a temporary dry dock was opened in the battalion area, where a dozen containers were to be loaded and sent to Mumbai by road for further shipping to Beirut. Being the pioneer contingent, we had to plan things from scratch not only to meet our immediate requirements but also for future Indian contingents. Therefore, from pin to pen, paper to pointer staff, dental chair to items of dog care, we had to plan in detail and procure stuff in that given time frame.

While the preparation was in full swing, on 21 September, I got a kind of heart-breaking news from the UN Cell, Army HQ: Lebanon had expressed its reservations about India replacing a contingent of Norway citing India's closeness to Israel, whose army was forcefully occupying part of South Lebanon, may compromise the principle of neutrality of the peacekeeping force, which could be detrimental to Lebanon's interest. It was decided at the Army HQ that notwithstanding this negative input, the preparation must continue without any break and the secrecy of this news must be maintained. In the South Block, there was a flurry of activity that day to discuss how to surmount this bolt from the blue. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Army Chief, all were keen to have Indian peacekeepers in the Middle East. Even the UN Department of Peace Keeping Operations (UNDPKO), that was dealing with the composition and deployment of the force, was in favour of India's induction in Lebanon. However, as per Chapter VI of the UN Charter, a country contributing to the peacekeeping force has to be accepted by the host country.

Around this time, 53rd UN General Assembly Session was in progress in New York, where heads of the member states were attending the 13th plenary session of the UN. Serendipitously, the Prime Minister (PM) of India, Atal Behari Vajpayee, and the PM of Lebanon, Rafik Hariri, were present there. They were to address the plenary session on 23 and 24 September 1998, respectively. The External Affairs Minister, Jaswant Singh, asked the Indian Ambassador in the US to fix a meeting between the two PMs on the sidelines, where this issue could be discussed to allay the Lebanese government's apprehension. By afternoon, it was learned that our Director General Military Operations (DGMO),

Lt Gen Inder Verma, would leave for New York on the midnight flight to brief PM Vajpayee and Mohamad Chatah, Lebanon's Ambassador to the US, about India's credentials in UN peacekeeping operations. I was asked to brief the DGMO about the state of preparation. Couple of days later, I learned that our charismatic PM, who unfailingly held the centre stage with grace and elan, had charmed Hariri. Though the ice was broken, the progress was rather slow. The UNDPKO was waiting for an official communication from the Government of Lebanon concurring the acceptance of Indian peacekeeping force, which took some time. In the meantime, Norway refused to extend its contingent's stay beyond 30 November 1998, and the UNDPKO informed Lebanon that in the given time frame, they were not in a position to deploy a contingent from any country other than India, which was a lucky punch for us.

Those three weeks of uncertainty were really challenging for me individually. I was going through the phenomenal 'loneliness of command'. I did not share this news with anyone in the battalion. All through this period, I maintained a tight-lipped stoic demeanour while accepting finite disappointment, but never losing infinite hope. There was no pause in the preparation and the battalion pulled out all the stops to meet the projected date. When, finally, after three weeks, the recce and liaison party comprising of Brigadier (Brig) Jayant Verma, Deputy Director General Military Operations (DDGMO), Col Grewal (Artillery), Col Jain (Corps of Signals), Tripurari Saran, Ministry of Defence, Maj Rajiv Mankotia of my battalion and I left for Lebanon, I thought there would be no more hurdles hereafter. But only if life was that simple!

Ajai Choudhry, Ambassador of India in Lebanon, welcomed the recce team with much warmth and invited us to dinner at his residence in Beirut. During dinner, he mentioned that the people of Marjeyoun (meaning 'meadow of springs') district in the Nabatiyeh governorate in Southern Lebanon, where the Indian peacekeepers were to be deployed, had objected to the Norwegian peacekeepers being replaced by the Indian Army for economic reasons, fearing loss of business and livelihood. They had made lot of noise in the local media and sent delegations to convince the Lebanese government to oppose induction of the Indian Army contingent, in addition to sending a fax to the Government of India through the Indian Ambassador. All the same, the recce party got on with its tasks and after spending two days at the UNIFIL HQ in Naqoura, we were flown to South Lebanon in the intended area of operation where

peacekeepers from Norway were deployed. In the next few days, one could see many banners on the road from Marjeyoun to Ebel-es-Saqi, in and around our deployment area, with captions like, 'We love you India but you are not a rich country like Norway. We will lose business and starve to death if you are deployed here' and 'Indians Go Back'. It was not an encouraging sight indeed. We learned that the mission area had 27 posts and most of them had cafeteria/eating joints run by local businessmen. In addition, the liquor shops and restaurants, electronics and souvenir shops, in and around the small towns and villages, were doing brisk business courtesy Norwegian peacekeepers who were highly paid. The Norway contingent comprised 25 per cent from the regular army, mainly command elements, and the balance 75 per cent were young university students or professionals who, after four weeks of training, came on a tour of duty for three to six months, incentivised by high allowances, tax exemptions and reckoning for further professional and educational growth. Most of them preferred eating food in the restaurants than the mess—no wonder business was thriving in that zone! After spending about four days with the Norway contingent, the recce team returned to Naqoura (UNIFIL HQ) for the concluding meeting to finalise the choice and supply of rations meeting our palate, help required in the interim and during induction, etc. Talking to Timor Goksel, the political adviser to UNIFIL since its inception, the topic of resistance by the locals figured prominently. Goksel assured an early resolution.

Immediately after we returned to India from the recce on 12 October 1998, I had to face a tough googly when the Army HQ intimated the decision of the higher authority: the Battalion Group was to carry INSAS rifles instead of AK-47s to showcase India's indigenous rifle to the world—a well-intended decision but capricious, with brutal administrative challenges to implement within the next four weeks. The very next day, special release orders were arranged and Commandant, Central Ordnance Depot (COD), Jabalpur, was asked to keep weapons and ammunition ready for issuing expeditiously. A collection-cum-deposition party under an officer left by road for Jabalpur; concomitantly, we sent 10 non-commissioned officers (NCOs) to Infantry School for a crash course on INSAS rifles. On completion of training, this group of NCOs trained the battalion in batches. We made a Key Result Areas (KRA) that not only should we learn handling of INSAS but also every one of us must fire to get the feel of the weapon before leaving the Indian

shores. The Raj Rif Regimental Centre kindly allowed us to use their small arms shooting range whenever it was available.

### **Training**

In 1998, when Indian peacekeepers were preparing for induction to Lebanon, there was no formal UN pre-induction training institute in India; this was established in New Delhi a couple of years later. In coordination with the Army HQ and the MEA, lectures were organised to educate officers and junior leaders on country study of Lebanon, including its geography, history and politics. In addition, I personally studied about Norway, its army, etc., whom we were to relieve. While returning from the recce and liaison with UNIFIL HQ and NORBATT, I brought along the mandate of UNIFIL, standard operating procedures (SOPs), including certain relevant extracts of administration and logistics instructions, and maps of Lebanon, UNIFIL and our intended area of operations. A detailed briefing was given to all on arrival during my 'Sainik Sammelan'. Lieutenant Colonel (Lt Col) K.K. Sharma from Army Training Command (ARTRAC) came down and took lectures on peacekeeping modalities, patrolling, tailing and other requirements under Chapter VI. Four weeks of Arabic language training for officers, JCOs and NCOs was conducted, besides a three-week crash course in French language for officers. At the end of the language course, each person was issued with a booklet containing 50 important commonly used sentences besides greetings. As Lebanon, unlike India, had left-hand driving, this training too was imparted. During preparatory stage, the most herculean task was to make load tables for the UN chartered aircraft and a dozen of containers that were to carry stuff to Beirut by ship.

### **Arrival and Deployment of the First Indian Contingent in Lebanon**

At last, sometime in the third week of October, UNDPKO issued the formal induction plan. We were allotted four chartered flights: one was meant for the advance party and three for the main body, with the last one flying out from New Delhi on night 22–23 November 1998. The advance party alighted from the UN chartered plane in Beirut in November with three of our peacekeepers leading the team bearing a flag each of India, Lebanon and the UN. There was a big applause and warm reception at the airport, where we were received by a Brigadier General (Brig Gen) of the Lebanese Army, Garrison Commander of Beirut,



Deputy Force Commander of UNIFIL and the Indian Ambassador in Lebanon. Our arrival was widely covered by the world media. Handing/ taking over parade and the accompanying ceremony, including lunch, was scheduled for 27 November. Almost 250 guests were invited: the Defence Minister of Norway, the Indian Ambassador, senior UN officials and contingent commanders from 12 countries, officials from the Lebanese Army, judges, mayors, college principals, religious heads, etc., to mention a few confirmed attendances. Media from 23 countries wanted to cover this event because, for the first time, India was entering the UNIFIL and Norway was winding down their mission after a stay of two decades. To attend this historic event, the Norway government sent their defence minister, along with the first CO, a retired Brigadier, who had established the Norwegian mission 20 years ago.

As part of UNIFIL's first Indian peacekeeping contingent, 2/4 GR Battalion Group (INDBATT-1) was deployed in the Israeli-occupied zone in South Lebanon, which borders Israel (see Figure 1). In 1998:

Israel occupied zone comprised about 10 percent of Lebanese territory, had within it over one hundred villages and towns that are part of Lebanon's provincial administrative districts of Tyre, Bint Jbail, Marjayoun, Hasbaiya, the Western Beka', and Nabatiyeh. The zone's diverse topography included the coastal plain along the

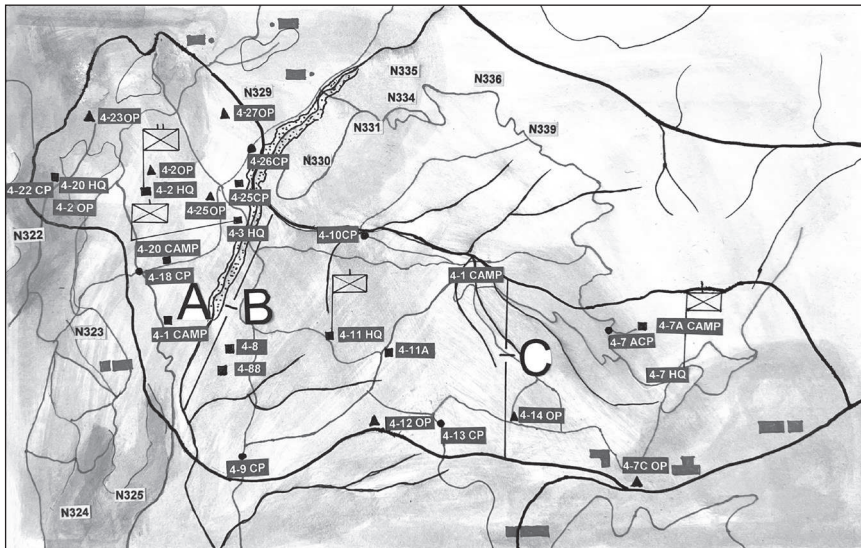


Figure 1 INDBATT Area of Operations

Source: Author

Mediterranean in the southwest and the foothills of the 2,814-meter Mount Hermon (*jebel al-shaykh*, in Arabic) in the northeast... It was recognized internationally that Israel controlled the occupied zone with its own military and security forces as well as with those of its auxiliary militia, the South Lebanon Army (SLA), which the U.N. described as De facto Forces (DFF).<sup>28</sup>

The UNIFIL, with its various contingents, was responsible to ensure peace in this conflict-ridden South Lebanon zone. However, the major differences with respect to other units of UNIFIL then were: (i) whereas others peacekeeping units' areas were partially occupied by the SLA/IDF, our area of operation was fully occupied by the IDF/SLA; and (ii) it was an independent exclusive zone having no other peacekeeping unit in proximity. And never was there any dull moment!

On 27 November, the handing/taking over ceremony was conducted by us with 250 invitees to witness it, followed by a mega lunch for all. Indian Ambassador Ajai Choudhry graced the occasion, and so did the Defence Minister of Norway. During my formal speech, when I mentioned India's age-old philosophy, 'Vasudeva Kutumbakam' (meaning "The World Is One Family"), and ended the speech by chanting excerpts of 'Shanti mantra' (religious utterances invoking peace), emphasising how eminently India is suitable for such a mission, there was standing ovation from all present. Lilted tunes of the Gorkha pipe band enthralled all and the photo finesse event won hearts of many. We started our tenure on a positive note and took full control of our responsibilities and modus operandi from the outgoing Norway contingent. However, as they had a different culture in their army, we reorganised our administration, like various messes, reporting procedure and defensive layout of some of the checkpoints and deployed locations. Further, we brought in some changes in the modus operandi immediately after interacting with the locals and visualising the difficulties they faced because of the rigid process that was being followed earlier. One thing in particular that struck me was that the Lebanese were made to wait too long at the checkpoints for security check; I felt it is unfair to keep the citizens of the country waiting for long in their own land because of an overemphasis on security. The whole process was changed to 'quick' check, allowing women teachers and children going to schools to move with random checks in a separate queue and adding more manpower in the peak hours. Everyone was greeted with a smile by saying *marhaba* (hello in Arabic) and 'namaste'. The mayor of Ebel-es-Saqi, Abou Samra, was a great help all through in understanding their points of view.



In addition, to alleviate their problems, we rendered certain services, such as making our RVC doctor and his team available—a badly needed service which the place was devoid of—repairing broken bridges (carried out by our engineering team) and helping local schools with computer education. Our doctors, especially the lady doctor, became very popular as Shiite women mostly were not comfortable with male doctors and there was no lady doctor available in the vicinity. We also provided ambulance for emergency evacuation, besides our doctors attending to emergency patients round the clock. Likewise, we took many other measures to make the local citizens' life a little more comfortable and free from fear, as they had been living for many years under constant hardships and fear of IDF/SLA/GSS and fear for getting trapped in the crossfire between Hezbollah/PLO and IDF and its surrogate, SLA. The Norway government had initiated a project to supply water to a dozen villages by lifting water from the Litani River flowing through the mountainous ranges and laying pipelines. The Ambassador of Norway personally met me to request us to complete the project with the help of our engineering team. This was done, much to the relief of the villagers who benefited from the project.

It is well known that peacekeeping operations are carried out under the full glare of public scrutiny. The role of the press during delicate negotiations is indeed of incalculable importance. The change in attitude of the local Lebanese, who once felt uneasy before our induction, was visible. Robert Fisk, a well-known author and journalist covering Lebanon and the Middle East news for *BBC* and other newspapers wrote an article in *Sunday London Times* covering Indian style of peacekeeping; it was a glowing tribute.

We chose 11 March 1999 for the ceremonial UN Medal Parade,<sup>29</sup> 11 March being our regimental day. Traditionally, on this day, 4 GR battalions start with a temple (mandir) function wherever they are, offering prayers and remembering the fallen. As we did not have a temple in Lebanon, on self-help basis we constructed one with 300 sitting capacity. This happened to be the only temple in Lebanon or the countries around. Apart from the Indian Ambassador in Lebanon, Lt Gen Chandra Shekhar—Vice Chief of Army Staff and Colonel of the 4 GR—and Brig. S.K. Bhasin graced the occasion, along with a host of guests from UNIFIL and Lebanese local and government representatives. Indian Army officers posted as staff in UNFIL HQ, like Col D.S. Bhardwaj and Lt Col Anil Bhatt, too joined the medal parade as recipients. It was

a grand affair where, once again, our pipes and drums stole the hearts of all and our dog platoon gave a magnificent display. Locals were already mesmerised by our ever-smiling gentle Gorkhas; during the medal parade, they volunteered to put up a show where men danced *Dapke*—Lebanese folk dance—and beautiful young girls clad in sarees danced to the tune of a popular Hindi film song chosen by them—a surprise gift indeed! The UNIFIL tenure was not all work and no play: there were inter-contingent basketball, badminton, cross-country run and small arms firing competitions. We came first in cross-country, small arms firing and women's badminton competition. We were given to understand that in the history of UNIFIL, no one had been able to beat the contingent from Ghana in the cross-country competition held in the criss-cross mountainous terrain. It became a talk of the town that at last Gorkha troops from the Indian Army had outpaced them!

While interacting with the cross-section of people in Lebanon, we observed that two Indians were well known to the Lebanese: Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. Though Tagore was well known in the intellectual circles, Gandhiji was known more widely, including by many commoners. It was my dream to leave an indelible mark, through a lasting gift on behalf of India, before leaving Lebanon on completion of our tour of duty. On my request, Abou Samra, a scion of the local royal family and a serving mayor, offered a piece of personal land in middle of the town, which till then had been used as a dump yard, to construct a park. The MEA, Government of India, liked the idea of constructing a park in Lebanon immensely and extended support. Our army engineering team, supported by the UN engineering team, swooped into action and we could manage to get a marble bust of Mahatma Gandhi from New Delhi, which was installed there in the garden christened 'Mahatma Gandhi Park'. The park was tastefully made with fountains, rose and other flowering plants, granite sitting benches and appropriate lighting arrangements. On our second UN Medal Parade Day in November 1999, in the presence of senior UNIFIL officers, the Indian Ambassador and many citizens of South Lebanon, a ceremony was organised to hand over the key of the entry gate of the park to the mayor, beside unveiling the bust of Mahatma Gandhi. The ceremony included playing of national anthem of India and Lebanon by our pipe band and a brief speech, both by me and the Mayor of Ebel-es-Saqi. My quoting Khalil Gibran's poem, 'On Friendship', from his book, *The Prophet*, was applauded by the South Lebanese citizens who kindly graced the occasion. I ended my speech

wishing citizens of Lebanon peace. It so happened that after 22 years, in the year 2000, the Israeli forces vacated almost all the areas of South Lebanon and SLA (DFF) was disbanded, bringing in some semblance of peace, though it did not last too long!

### **Major Episodes Worth Recalling**

As a CO, on required basis, I led delegations on behalf of the Force Commander, UNIFIL, composed of multi-country observers, for conflict resolution meetings with IDF/SLA commanders; a process that we followed to reduce friction amicably. One such person with whom we had conflict resolution meeting a couple of times was Brig Gen Frez Gerstein, then head of the Lebanon Liaison Unit based at Marjeyoun. There were many small incidents during the tenure of INDBATT-1, from November 1998 to December 1999, a few of which are worth recalling.

1. On 28 February 1999, our checkpoint opposite an Israeli border village, Metula, reported to the operation room that an IDF convoy, without stopping at the checkpoint for verification, had whizzed past Metula CP (an entry point to Lebanon from Israel where a UN checkpoint was positioned)—Hasbaiya road. Gerstein accompanied by a few others visited Hasbaiya, a Lebanese border village where IDF's Druze battalion was deployed. According to the mutually agreed SOP, establishing identity at the checkpoint by at least one person in the leading convoy was mandatory, and this was flouted. We had no prior information and neither had HQ UNIFIL given any clearance to the IDF for visiting villages inside UN-controlled Blue Line, though they could travel on the road other than the UN deployed locations. After visiting the troops, the convoy then proceeded to the village of Kfarchouba, a Lebanese village in the Hasbaya district of the Nabatiyeh governorate in Southern Lebanon, for a condolence meeting at the home of a slain SLA soldier. Gerstein and his team, comprising of Warrant Officer Imad Abu-Rish, Staff-Sergeant Omar El-Kabetz and Kol Israel northern region correspondent, Ilan Roeh, were returning after the condolence meeting when they were booby-trapped near Kaukaba village, about 500 metres from the UN location. Innocuous-looking artificial stones, with shape, texture like any other big stone pieces, laid along the mountainous road had powerful explosives placed inside, which were triggered remotely from a hilltop nearby, little beyond the Blue Line, killing all four persons of the convoy, including Gerstein. Engineer forces were

quickly deployed for recovering bodies amidst the Hezbollah mortar firing. This was a new innovative ambush ploy and attack tactics used by them. The incident was highlighted by the media and there was a murmur by the IDF that INDBATT could have averted the incident had they carried out proper surveillance. Our road patrol routinely checked the safety of the road and if the movements were known, which was the norm for a convoy movement, then special measures were always undertaken. In fact, in a previous meeting at the Liaison Unit at Israel, we had been complimented for our professionalism and reduction of skirmishes by keeping the warring factions separate to the extent possible. We rushed to the spot and ensured two more unexploded explosive-filled stone pieces were separated; and a safe lane was created with proper marking and guards positioned. Our sniffer dogs were of much help. A quick joint enquiry by the UNIFIL and the IDF proved gross violation of procedure in place by the IDF convoy and diversion of route suddenly without any notice. It also got established that while they were attending the condolence meeting, Hezbollah informers had passed the intelligence and quickly put explosives in those artificial stones and a small team had positioned itself at a vantage point keeping the convoy movement under surveillance, with informers updating the moves as well. The matter was buried within days. However, the sad loss of life was indeed regrettable. One could only wish that the ill-fated convoy had followed the laid-down SOP.

2. In June 1999, when Hezbollah launched volleys of Katyusha rockets at border settlements in northern Israel, two Israeli civilians got killed. As always had been the case, the IDF retaliated and during this imbroglio, one of the rockets fell just 200 metre short of our battalion HQ. Fortunately, no one was injured. We lodged a protest through UNIFIL HQ. There were claims and counterclaims as to whose rocket missed the target and had a shortfall inside our area of deployment. In this exchange of rockets, the IDF's sharp reaction killed eight Lebanese and included a 10-hour bombing campaign by Israel on 24–25 June that targeted Lebanese infrastructure in Beirut and other locations throughout the country.

#### CONCLUSION

A century ago, expressing his anguish on the state of affairs in Lebanon, Gibran penned:

Pity the nation that acclaim the bully as hero, and that  
Deems the glittering conqueror bountiful...  
Pity the nation that welcomes its new ruler with trumpeting,  
and farewells him with hootings, only to welcome another  
with trumpeting again...  
Pity the nation divided into fragments, each fragment  
Deeming itself a nation.<sup>30</sup>

Gibran wrote this poem, titled 'Pity the Nation', based on the pre-independence history of his country. Lebanon's history since independence has not been much different: it has been marked by alternating periods of relative political stability and prosperity based on Beirut's position as a regional centre for finance and trade, interspersed with political turmoil and armed conflict (1948 Arab–Israeli War; Lebanese Civil War 1975–1990; 2005 Cedar Revolution; 2006 Lebanon War; 2007 Lebanon conflict; 2006–08 Lebanese protests; 2008 conflict in Lebanon; 2011 Syrian Civil War spillover; and 2019–20 Lebanese protests).<sup>31</sup>

The principal purpose for setting up the UN was maintenance of peace. On this front, the record of the UN has varied from spectacular success in some peacekeeping missions to blameworthy failure in many others. Overall, despite the pulls and pressures and partisan interests of some of the permanent members of the Security Council, it must be said that the UN peacekeeping efforts have been reasonably successful.

Indian Army's participation in UN peacekeeping operations spans a period of seven decades. 'Diplomacy, Humanitarian Approach and Steadfast Impartiality'<sup>32</sup>—key advice by the then Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, for Korea-bound first Indian peacekeepers—have remained the guiding principles for Indian peacekeepers working under the flag of the UN. India has supported UN peacekeeping operations through contribution of outstanding force commanders, elite military contingents, well-trained police contingents, impartial observers and dedicated staff officers in various mission HQ, including UNDPKO, besides excellent, unbiased civil servants for conducting free and fair elections. Their performance, impeccable conduct, equanimity and forbearance have been widely acclaimed.

The UNIFIL has evolved over the years depending on the ground realities in Lebanon. Peacekeepers have been relentlessly helping strife-torn Lebanon 'to become more resilient to conflict, laying the groundwork to sustain long-term peace, including by addressing root causes of conflict.'<sup>33</sup> Despite the IDF withdrawal and disbandment of SLA and

GSS, Hezbollah is still operating on the plea that the village of Ghajar at Shebaa Farms, located half in Israel and half in Lebanon bordering Syria, is still under occupation of Israel.

As the first Indian peacekeeping contingent in Lebanon, we had the onus to carve a niche befitting the standard of the Indian Army in all fields, including winning hearts of the local citizens who were very apprehensive before we relieved the Norway contingent. We endeavoured to provide succour to the 'population in this zone of moral ambiguities and paradoxes, absurdities and anomalies, who were forced to make the compromises necessary to survive'.<sup>34</sup>

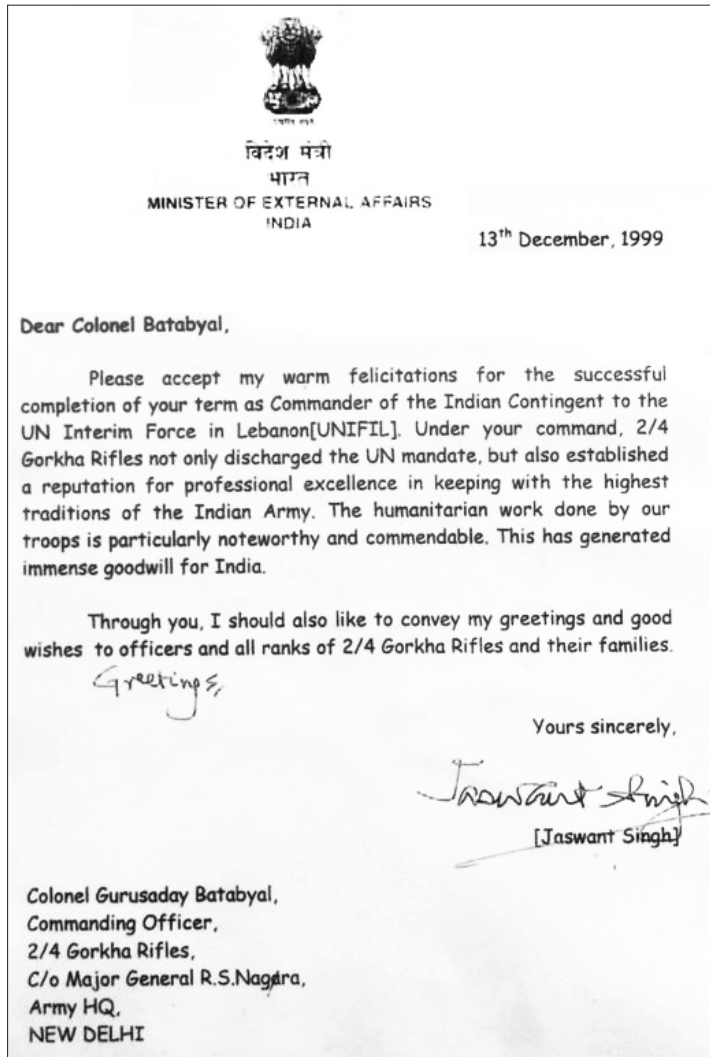
We set up many operational processes and modified administrative infrastructure befitting Indian Army's culture and ethos, but keeping them within the realm of the guidelines of the UNIFIL. Being the pioneer contingent, we made many SOPs to ensure smooth sailing not only during our duration but also for the future Indian Army relieving units. One of the most important events there was the UN medal parade, which was held after every six months. By following the drills of the Indian Military Academy and mixing it with the other entertaining shows, like band display and dog show, we made the event memorable. In fact, before us in the UNIFIL, only the Irish contingent had just two solo pipers, which they co-opted during their medal parade. Display by our pipe band and the special show of our dog platoon were telecast couple of times by many Lebanese TV channels. Besides, we took adequate care in selecting the guest list and ensuring the correct protocol for sitting as the Lebanese officials, like mayors and judges, were very particular about it. We also made sure that the lunch menu consisted of a variety of Indian, Lebanese and continental menu to suit everyone's taste. Indeed, we received several accolades from many corners, like the UN HQ, the Lebanese senior officials, other contingent commanders and prominent citizens.

Dr Assad Kotaite, President of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), after visiting his birthplace in South Lebanon, faxed: 'It was a great pleasure to meet you and see your deep belief in the noble mission which was entrusted on you and on your Battalion to serve peace with humility and conviction in the south Lebanon.'<sup>35</sup> Y.K. Sinha, from the Permanent Mission of India to the UN, wrote:

We have received glowing accounts of the performance of your battalion in UNIFIL from various senior officials in United Nations Headquarters who have had the opportunity to visit you in Lebanon.

Your battalion has maintained the highest traditions of the Indian Army and has added lustre to the already formidable reputation of our troops in various United Nations peace keeping operations.<sup>36</sup>

From the Government of India, I received a letter from Jaswant Singh, Minister of External Affairs, which is eloquent about our performance in the UNIFIL (see Figure 2). A rare recognition for a job well done.



**Figure 2** Letter received by the author from Shri Jaswant Singh, Minister of External Affairs, Government of India, on 13 December 1999



A week before we were to return home for good, many farewell parties were organised centrally as well as locally. I was deeply humbled by the love and respect displayed by Sheikh Fandis of Hasbaiya—second highest Druze religious leader in whole of Lebanon—who, in a gathering of 3,000 Druze people, conferred me the title of ‘Sheikh’, the highest honour, and presented me a black gown worn by men of such titles. Some prominent South Lebanese citizens, led by the mayor, also hosted a gala dinner for us. On our last day, citizens lined up in hundreds with tear-filled eyes to bid farewell, offering flowers and small gifts—and a reciprocal ‘namaste’ by our men and women with folded hands, their misty eyes looking at the Lebanese brethren for the last time. Strangers we met and now friends, we were parting. After bidding adieu to the Indian Ambassador and the embassy staff, when I reached Beirut airport to board the special UN chartered plane to return to New Delhi, I was pleasantly surprised to see that Abou Samra, Mayor of Ebel-es-Saqi, whose support we received all through our tenure, was waiting for me with a flower bouquet and a packet of Lebanese sweets to see us off. We hugged last time with tears rolling over our cheeks, never to meet again.

#### NOTES

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