Peacekeepers
who became one with the people

He typifies UNIFIL in many ways, not the least because, having joined the Mission for just six months, he stayed for 24 years. **Timur Goksel** was thus the public face of UNIFIL for most of its 30 years: from 1979 as Spokesman and, since 1995, as Senior Adviser. After his retirement in 2003, he lives in Beirut and lectures in several Lebanese universities on international politics, the UN and peacekeeping.

He reveals to *Al Janoub's* **Neeraj Singh,** aspects of peacekeeping that are hard to foresee, leave alone mandate -products of innate human impulses corresponding to uniquely felt needs perceived in community -the real success story of UNIFIL. Excerpts:

SINGH: UNIFIL at its inception had to jostle for space amidst various armed groups, only to find the IDF back in force from 1982. What really did UNIFIL achieve in those years?

GOKSEL: To begin with, it brought normalcy; it brought people back to their homes. When we first arrived, we had only 10,000 people in south Lebanon. In three years, there were half a million.

The very fact that UNIFIL, despite its unworkable mandate and with no political support except for a small group of dedicated UN bureaucrats, turned out to be a resilient force that held its ground despite suffering more than 100 fatalities in action (out of 250 total fatalities) was an achievement in its own right.

But the real and rarely noticed success story was how this force became a part of the land, established close links with the ignored people who had no state services whatsoever, gained their gratitude, enabled them to rebuild their lives and helped to transform an abandoned landscape into a thriving, secure region during the 1990s.

And how did this come about?

We had no military or economic power. People knew that and they understood. We were recycling everything in Naqoura: computers, desks, whatever, we gave it [to the people]. Soldiers went and painted their schools. We ran their water pumps; they had no gasoline for the village pump, so we gave them gasoline.

During the Israeli invasion of 1982, there was a humanitarian

Timur Goksel

crisis in Tyre when the Israeli army confined thousands of people to the beach without food or shelter. It was outside our area of operations, but we organised relief convoys staffed by volunteer UNIFIL personnel to go there and provided them food and medical treatment. That was the start of the relationship between UNIFIL and Tyre. When the Israelis left in 1985, the people of Tyre offered us their houses free of charge. We opened an office there.

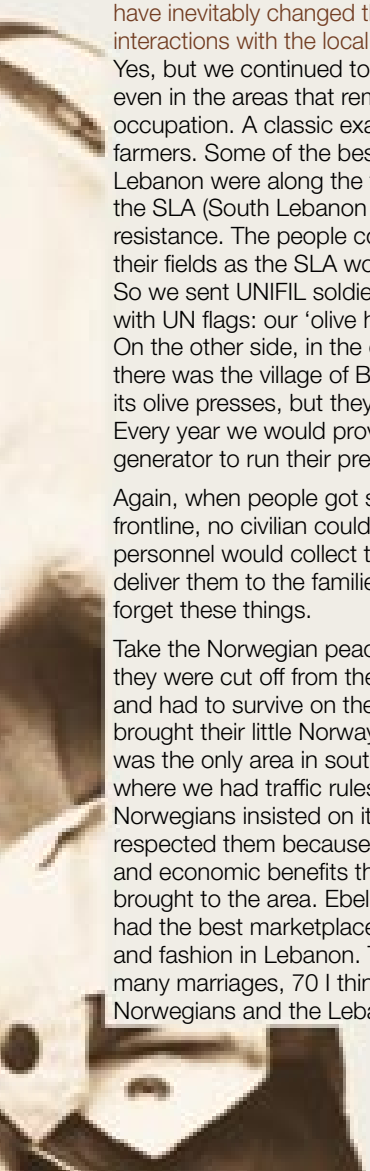
1983-85 was a difficult time when the Israelis were conducting operation 'Iron Fist' against the resistance – raiding villages. I would take foreign journalists to villages and that helped impose caution on the Israelis. During a raid in Burj Rahhal village in 1983, the French soldiers stood on the rooftops of some houses to prevent the Israelis from blowing them up.

It was a war of wits in the south. In those days UNIFIL was in the villages, we were living there; these people were our neighbours, we had to protect them.

The partial withdrawal of IDF in 1985 would have inevitably changed the nature of your interactions with the local population.
Yes, but we continued to assist the people even in the areas that remained under occupation. A classic example is the olive farmers. Some of the best olive fields in Lebanon were along the frontline between the SLA (South Lebanon Army) and the resistance. The people could not go to their fields as the SLA would fire at them. So we sent UNIFIL soldiers to escort them with UN flags: our 'olive harvest patrols'. On the other side, in the occupied area, there was the village of Bayt Lif, famous for its olive presses, but they had no power. Every year we would provide them a generator to run their presses.

Again, when people got shot along the frontline, no civilian could go there. So UN personnel would collect the bodies and deliver them to the families. People don't forget these things.

Take the Norwegian peacekeepers: they were cut off from the rest of UNIFIL and had to survive on their own. They brought their little Norway here. That was the only area in south Lebanon where we had traffic rules, because the Norwegians insisted on it and the people respected them because of the services and economic benefits the Norwegians brought to the area. Ebel es Saqi village had the best marketplace for jewellery and fashion in Lebanon. There were so many marriages, 70 I think, between the Norwegians and the Lebanese.



Then the orphanage in Tibnin. When there was shelling in the area, the Irish peacekeepers would run to the orphanage to play with the children so that they do not get traumatised by the shelling. That is the most humane thing I have seen in my life.

How did you address the organised resistance in your area of operations?
We had open liaison channels with all the groups. There was no state structure and so we had to deal with them. When friction started between the Shias and PLO in 1981, Amal asked for direct communication with us. We established liaison with them. Amal became very pro-UNIFIL; they fought for UNIFIL.

The 1982 Israeli occupation brought a totally different equation to the south. The

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Shia were happy that the Israelis would drive out the Palestinians. But soon they realised that the Israelis were not leaving and decided it was time for resistance.

Hezbollah appeared: they had come from the north and they could not understand why there were these European soldiers having such friendly relations with the people. UNIFIL went through a very difficult period late 1980s: this was when our Chief OGL (Observer Group Lebanon) was kidnapped and killed.

The turning point came with the Damascus accord between Hezbollah and Amal, particularly a year after when Hassan Nasrallah took over in 1992. He was from the south and he knew UNIFIL. The first thing he did was appoint a liaison officer to UNIFIL.

But the big transformation came with the change in generation when the southerners joined Hezbollah. These people had

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grown up with UNIFIL. A boy who was born in 1980 and became a Hezbollah fighter in 1998, knew UNIFIL for 18 years; he probably went to a school painted by UNIFIL, or had benefited from its services. He would not harm us: there is this innate Lebanese hospitality towards foreigners.

How were things after the Israeli withdrawal in 2000?
The Israelis surprised us by the speed of their withdrawal. We sent out UNIFIL patrols to reassure the people. The Lebanese Army Intelligence sent their personnel in civilian clothes: 20-30 of them, very effective, people respected them. Everyone was expecting rivers of blood to be flowing in the aftermath of the Israeli withdrawal. But nothing happened -no police, no army, UNIFIL driving on the roads but not having to do anything.

About 6,000 people escaped to Israel fearing retribution. But within months they started to return. We would pick them up from the border and take them to the Lebanese Army Intelligence at Naqoura Port. And they were escorted home by the Lebanese Army or even the Hezbollah. Some of them would get a couple of months in jail, that's all. So the Lebanese sorted it out the Lebanese way.

As UNIFIL we did our bit by being around and moving quickly to some villages where we were never before. There was nothing much UNIFIL was expected to do anyway.

Later a Joint Force of Lebanese Army and Gendarmerie were deployed, but under police command. It was a symbolic presence. They controlled the main roads. They ran their show and on that ground there was a move to cut UNIFIL strength down to 1,200. We were heading in that direction when the July 2006 war happened.