

Orlando family rescued from Lebanon

By Teresa Lantigua Peterson, Orlando

Antony, Patrick and Alain Harb, students of Holy Family Catholic School in Orlando, spent days waiting to be evacuated from the battle zone of Lebanon while their parents were desperately trying to reach them.

It all started when Amine Harb left Orlando July 11 to visit his wife and children who were spending part of their summer visiting family in Lebanon. But first he stopped in Milan and his wife Paula joined him for a minivacation while the grandparents cared for the children.

A day later, Israel launched a massive military offensive against Lebanon and Hezbollah, a group of terrorist Islamic militants.

The children, ages 7 through 13, were in a country under attack and their parents were hundreds of miles away with no way to enter the war-torn area.



Antony, Patrick and Alain Harb

"The second day in Italy, the Beirut airport was closed. My wife and I were waiting to fly there, but after three or four days things were getting worse," Amine said.

The grandparents contacted the American Embassy about evacuating the children, who are all American citizens, but they were told to wait for further instructions. They finally received the call July 18 and the children had to be at the embassy building within one hour for evacuation.

The marine helicopters transported the children to Cyprus and because they were alone with no relatives, they were under the care of the American military and officials. The American Embassy in Nicosia, Cyprus, arranged

for the children to stay with an American family until their mother arrived.

"I received a call from the kids that they were safe and staying with a family in Nicosia. I was so relieved and so thankful to that family who told me the children were healthy and would have a good night's sleep," Amine said.

Meanwhile Paula flew 10 hours from Milan to Poland and then finally to Cyprus to be reunited with her children.

They soon boarded a U.S. chartered flight and were on the first plane full of evacuees that arrived in Baltimore July 20. Amine flew from Milan to Orlando and the five family members were reunited later that day.

"It was a very happy moment," he said.

When he arrived back in the United States, Amine checked his cell phone and found more than 60 messages from friends and St. Jude parishioners who were asking about the family's welfare and sending their prayers.

"I was overwhelmed by my parish and friends here. It felt like I had not gone through this experience alone," he said.

Amine and Paula belong to St. Jude Maronite Catholic Church. He has been in Orlando 20 years and has attended St. Jude since it first began as a mission church.

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