

# Ah, April in Lebanon!

Spring is coming to the mountains and valleys of central Lebanon, bringing a fresh crop of the world's best hashish, Bekaa Valley Gold, and yet another round of savage internecine battles between the nation's Christian warlords.

The hashish is for export for Europe: It pays for the guns and a seemingly endless supply of bullets and artillery shells that are relentlessly blowing little Lebanon apart. The drug of choice for Lebanon's gangs and tribal armies is nerve-fraying, head-jolting, paranoia-producing Benzedrine.

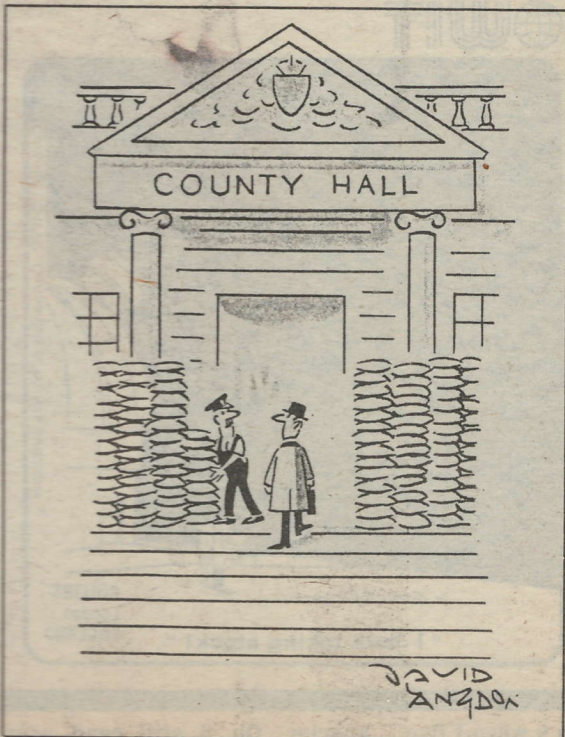
Lebanon's civil war is now in its 15th bloody year and it shows little sign of ending. The original cause for the war was a struggle by Lebanon's Moslem majority to gain economic and political parity with the Christian minority that had long dominated this nation of 2.8 million. But after years of confused fighting, shifting alliances and intervention by Israel, Syria and the U.S., along with meddling by other Arab states and France, the war has degenerated into a senseless, murderous meleé.

Maronite and Orthodox Christians, Sunni and Shia Moslems, Druze and Armenians have all fought each other, their fellow co-religionists and the Syrians or Israelis. In short, the entire nation has run amok as private armies and bands of thugs vie for control of the hashish trade and villages — a sort of gang war on a mass scale.

The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, secretly supported by the U.S., accelerated the disintegration of this wretched country. Adding to its misery, Lebanon has become a proxy battleground between Syria and Israel, both of which have tried to turn it into a protectorate.

In recent months, Lebanon reached a new level

## Punch



"Flood protection? No, mate. It's for when we announce our poll tax."

## ERIC MARGOLIS



of dementia as rival Christian factions battled for control of the region around what's left of shattered Beirut. Nearly 1,000 Christians, mostly civilians, have died and more than 8,000 have been wounded in the fighting between the mini-armies of Gen. Michael Aoun and warlord Samir Geagea, both claiming to be the sole leader of Lebanon's Christians. With a seemingly inexhaustible supply of 155mm shells, the two sides have been shelling residential areas with maniacal abandon.

As the fighting continues to rage, Lebanese Christian civilians are seeking refuge in Moslem areas. For their part, the Moslem factions and the Syrians are sitting back and watching the Christians slaughter one another. So much for Maronite claims that Lebanon's war was a struggle for Christian survival against Islamic hordes.

Last fall, after heavy pressure from the Arab states, most of Lebanon's factions met in Saudi Arabia and agreed, after much palavering, to a new government that gave Moslems equal rights. But Gen. Aoun refused to join the agreement or the new, but impotent Lebanese government.

First, he battled the Moslem forces and Syrians and then turned on his rival Geagea's Lebanese forces. Aoun's little army was created and funded to the tune of US\$300 million by the CIA when the Reagan administration was trying to impose a puppet regime on Lebanon. Geagea's Lebanese forces were largely armed and trained by Israel.

Samir Geagea is remembered as the man who, under the eyes of the Israelis, led the slaughter of some 1,000 Palestinian civilians at the Shatilla and Sabra camps.

Since 1982, France, which wants to reassert influence in its former colony, has provided secret support to Aoun. Iraq has also aided Aoun as a way of bedeviling its arch foes, the Syrians, who have 40,000 troops in Lebanon.

As if all this was not bad enough, chaotic Lebanon has become a haven for every sort of mad dog terrorist organization in the Mideast and a legion of criminals.

Somewhere in this swamp of evil, a group of western hostages is still being held, probably by pro-Iranian Shia militants. But even Iran has lost much of its influence among radical Shias and hopes of getting the hostages out seem faint.

Meanwhile, the PLO has managed to reassemble 11,000 fighters in Lebanon and to rebuild much of its infrastructure that was uprooted by the 1982 Israeli invasion. The PLO force is no real threat to Israel but it could prove a severe nuisance if the PLO forsakes its current peace policy and decides to resume guerrilla attacks against Israel and the chunk of southern Lebanon that Israel has more or less annexed.

Short of a miracle, or a sudden eruption of common sense, it looks like this coming Easter in Lebanon is going to be once again heralded by salvos of 155mm shells as Christians cower in bomb shelters to celebrate the rising of the Prince of Peace.