

US court fines Iran 2.65 bln for 'heinous' 1983 Lebanon attack

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WASHINGTON (AFP) — A US federal judge on Friday ordered Iran to pay 2.65 billion dollars to families of 241 soldiers killed in the 1983 bombing of a Marine barracks in Beirut, calling his ruling a warning that attacks on US citizens will not be tolerated.

Judge Royce Lamberth said the award "may be the largest ever entered by a court of the United States against a foreign nation."

Expressing admiration for the fallen soldiers and sympathy for their families, Lamberth issued his decision after considering claims by 1,000 family members and a small number of survivors.

"The court hopes that this extremely sizeable judgment will serve to aid in the healing process for these plaintiffs, and simultaneously sound an alarm to the defendants that their unlawful attacks on our citizens will not be tolerated," he wrote in his ruling from a federal court in Washington DC.

A previous court in 2003 held that Iran provided financial and logistical help for the lethal 1983 attack carried out by the militant Shiite group Hezbollah.

Although the bombing occurred nearly 24 years ago, "it is clear from testimony presented to this court ... that intense suffering experienced on that day has had a tragically lasting effect on the plaintiffs who have brought this action," Lamberth wrote.

The judge indicated that the US administration had at no point warned the court that the case could interfere with US foreign policy interests.

US troops were deployed in Lebanon in 1983 as part of a UN-sponsored multinational peacekeeping force in hopes of containing the country's civil war.

On October 23, 1983, a 19-tonne explosives-laden truck rammed through barricades and detonated in front of the US barracks in Beirut, demolishing the building in a massive explosion.

The attack was the "most deadly state-sponsored terrorist attack made against American citizens" until the attacks of September 11, 2001, the judge said.

As part of the same wave of attacks, a French barracks was also bombed, killing 58 French paratroopers.

Families in the case welcomed the ruling.

"The families were very gratified by the judge's decision," spokesman Steven Hofman told AFP. "Their effort is to seek accountability for what occurred and against state sponsors of terrorism."

The Iranian regime has dismissed the 2003 ruling holding it liable for the bombing, saying the decision was "provoked by the Zionists."

While Iran denies responsibility for the bombing, it played an instrumental role in the founding of Hezbollah in the 1980s, which was initially dedicated to driving out Israeli forces and now advocates the destruction of Israel.

The families will face an uphill battle trying to collect the money, which they hope to secure through the seizure of Iranian assets around the world.

The spokesman said the families are lobbying the US Congress for legislation that would make it easier to chase down and seize Iranian assets.

In Iran, a hardline group has celebrated those who carried out the bombing as "martyrs" and in 2004 gathered at a monument dedicated to the attack.

The 1.5 meters (five feet) high monument at the Behesteh Zahra cemetery outside Tehran -- where many soldiers of the Iran-Iraq war are buried -- features sculpted images of US troops picking up dead bodies.

The group, which calls itself the "Committee for the Glorification of Martyrs of the Global Islamic Movement," says it has no ties to Iran's clerical regime.

<http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5g1XRa7v7LYwf0sCshPG2V0YZdmoQ>

Iran Fined \$2.65 Billion for Terrorism
By MATT APUZZO – 38 minutes ago

WASHINGTON (AP) — Iran must pay \$2.65 billion to the families of the 241 U.S. service members killed in the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, a federal judge declared Friday in a ruling that left survivors and families shedding tears of joy.

U.S. District Judge Royce C. Lamberth described his ruling as the largest-ever such judgment by an American court against another country. "These individuals, whose hearts and souls were forever broken, waited patiently for nearly a quarter century for justice to be done," he said.

Iran has been blamed for supporting the militant group Hezbollah, which carried out the suicide bombing in Beirut. It was the worst terrorist act against U.S. targets until the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.

Hundreds of people crowded into a federal courtroom to hear Friday's ruling. Parents have grown old since their children were killed. Siblings have grown into middle-age. Children have married and started families of their own.

Weeping spectators stood and erupted in applause and hugs as Lamberth left the bench.

The ruling allows nearly 1,000 family members and a handful of survivors to try to collect Iranian assets from various sources around the world. Finding and seizing that money will be difficult, however, and the families are backing a law in Congress that would make it easier for terrorism victims and their families to do so.

Families were encouraged by Libya's decision to ultimately accept responsibility for the 1988 bombing of a Pan Am flight over Scotland. The country, once a pariah by Washington's view, agreed to compensate the families of the 270 victims. Part of the \$2.7 billion has been paid. A final \$2 million installment to each family is outstanding.

"This is a sense of victory, of winning a battle," said Paul Rivers, who was a 20-year-old enlisted Marine on the second floor of the barracks when it exploded. "When we win the war is when we collect, when we make them pay for what they did."

Iran has denied responsibility for the attack. The nation did not respond to the 6-year-old lawsuit and was represented only by an empty table.

Family members said they hoped Friday's ruling would pressure foreign governments not to sponsor terrorism. Lynn Smith Derbyshire, whose brother, Vincent Smith, was killed in the attack, said countries won't stop until "it begins to actually cost them money to kill Americans."

Some disagreed about whether that will happen. Roxanne Garcia-Bates, who was 16 when her brother, Randy Garcia, was killed, said she was surprised to find a sense of comfort being with the other families in court. She said she was pleased that Lamberth had made such a strong statement, but doubted that Iran would change anytime soon.

"You can't take enough money away to get them to stop what they're doing," she said.

All agreed that emotions remain raw to this day.

Rivers described being one of the second floor's five survivors. All but him lost arms or legs, he said. He was buried in the rubble for two hours, he said. Debris had punctured his eardrum and "I literally had rocks inside my head."

Shirley Murry of Baltimore, who was 16 years old at the time, described the tense days of waiting around the television for word of her brother, Ulysses Parker. Today, every time the news carries a story about a fallen soldier or an explosion overseas, she said it's like that first day all over again.

Lamberth said the law "offers a meager attempt to make the surviving members whole." He said he hoped the judgment would alert Iran that terrorism has consequences and help in the families' healing process. Pausing, he added:

"That's all I can do."

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