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One year since the Beirut blast: Lebanon's social, economic, and political crisis deepens

A year has passed since one of the world's largest non-nuclear explosions at the port of Beirut devastated the northern part of Lebanon's capital city.

The blast that could be heard as far away as Cyprus exacted a terrible toll, killing at least 218 people and injuring 7,500. It caused around \$15 billion in property damage to the city's buildings and infrastructure making 300,000 people homeless. Last week, the United Nations warned that Lebanon's water supply could collapse within a month due to the collapse of the power grid.

The explosion wrought havoc to a country already reeling under the impact of an economic meltdown. Its six million people, many of them refugees from Palestine and Syria, have long been ensnared in the wider regional power struggles, including the bitter armed conflict of 1975 to 1990, between shifting alliances backed by rival powers.



The explosion that hit the Beirut port, Wednesday August 5, 2020 (source: AP Photo / Bilal Hussein)

In recent years, US imperialism, along with Saudi Arabia and France, has piled on pressure as part of its broader campaign to isolate Iran and Syria, widening its sanctions on Hezbollah and Syria, with whose economy Lebanon is closely connected. Hezbollah, the Iran-backed bourgeois-clerical party, together with its allies forms the largest political bloc in parliament.

The aim of the de facto economic blockade against the country is to orchestrate a return to power by the Sunni Future Movement of former Prime Minister Sa'ad Hariri and his allies, after they were ousted by the mass social protests that erupted in October 2019 against economic hardship, government corruption and the country's sectarian political setup.

This, along with the financial looting and mismanagement of the economy by Lebanon's financial elite through its political parties and the central bank, whose governor is now under investigation by the Swiss banking authorities, led to the government's default on its overseas debt, a currency collapse that wiped out foreign reserves, soaring inflation, the doubling of food prices, and widespread poverty. This has been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic which, according to official figures that grossly underestimate the reality, has cost nearly 8,000 lives.

Having run down its foreign reserves, Lebanon faces a growing shortage of fuel, medicine and other basic goods, leading to power cuts for many hours a day. It has signed a barter-

type agreement with Iraq to supply one million tonnes of heavy fuel oil for electricity generation, enough for four months, in exchange for \$300-\$400 million worth of goods and services from Lebanon.

More than half the population live in poverty. A recent survey by Save the Children found that about 47 percent of Lebanon's population cannot afford essential goods like lentils, cooking oil, diapers, sanitary pads and fuel, while "Hundreds of thousands of children are going to bed hungry, often without having eaten a single meal that day."

"Families can't afford the electricity to run a fridge or hot water, or the medicines they need to treat illness. The longer this situation continues, the more likely it is that children will slide into malnutrition, which ultimately could lead to death."

The government had applied for an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan, which would necessitate "free market reforms" that would plunge millions into destitution and cut across key and conflicting interests of the ruling elite. Moreover, any such loan would also be subject to US approval and be conditional on Lebanon's political alignment with the Sunni oil states and against Iran and Syria, conditions that are anathema to Hezbollah.

Without accepting the IMF's terms, Lebanon would not be able to access aid pledged at a conference by the European and regional powers. Led by France, the European Union is likewise ramping up the pressure on Hezbollah, having just announced the adoption of a legal framework for a sanctions regime against Lebanese individuals and entities.

Last year's catastrophe was caused by ammonium nitrate, a key component of fertilizers, mine explosives and bombs, stored at the port. In September 2013, the ship transporting the chemicals from Georgia to Mozambique via Beirut was abandoned and later confiscated after a dispute over unpaid fees between the owner and the port authorities. In 2014, a court ordered the removal of the 2,750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate from the ship to a warehouse at the port, in the heart of the city.

Six years later, the chemicals caught fire, possibly triggered by workmen welding nearby and/or by a stash of fireworks, setting off two explosions with the force equivalent to one-20th of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima or a 3.3 to 4.5 local magnitude earthquake.

The explosion was the result of negligence, inaction and corruption on the part of Lebanon's plutocrats, mismanagement by the port authorities as well as the inaction of the flag registry's country and ship owner. Despite several investigations that had warned of the dangers, successive governments headed by Lebanon's billionaire Prime Ministers Najib Mikati, Tammim Salaam and Sa'ad Hariri, took no action to implement the recommendations. It is a damning indictment of the entire ruling elite that have for decades enriched themselves at the expense of Lebanese workers, turning Beirut into a playground for the region's millionaires and billionaires.

However, days after the blast Prime Minister Hassan Diab and his government resigned when it became clear that they were to take the sole blame for the disaster. Diab, an engineering professor, had been installed as a "technocrat" to head the government in January after mass social protests erupted in October 2019 against economic hardship, government corruption and the country's sectarian political setup, forcing Hariri's resignation.

Diab's cabinet, largely made up of non-aligned people, was supported by Hezbollah, making him a hate figure for the Christian and Sunni plutocrats allied with Hariri's Future Movement. Future Movement refused to cooperate with the government, leading to the eruption of small but violent clashes between the two rival blocs and fears of another armed conflict backed by rival regional powers similar to that of 1975-1990.

Despite his resignation, Diab has remained in post in a caretaker role while various thoroughly discredited Sunni politicians, including Hariri, tried and failed to cobble together a government acceptable to the President Michel Aoun and his faction. Najib Mikati, a former prime minister, Lebanon's richest businessman and banker, and a resident of the northern port city of Tripoli, the country's poorest city, is currently attempting the task, with no greater success.

The investigation ordered by Aoun to report by August 11, 2020 into the cause of the blast has been symptomatic of the politicians' determination to avoid responsibility. One year later, the investigation has descended into farce as several nominees for the presiding judge were rejected and legislators have stalled on lifting immunity on politicians and agency chiefs the judge has sought to question.

A report by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation carried out last October and seen recently by Reuters claims that only one-fifth of the shipment of ammonium nitrate unloaded in Beirut in 2013 exploded in August—without explaining how the discrepancy arose or where the rest of the shipment has gone, fueling suspicions that much of it had been stolen.

None of the demands for greater social equality, democratic rights and an end to corruption and sectarian-based politics that drove the months-long social protests of 2019-20 have been granted. The “technocratic” government was unable to make any headway against the entrenched positions of Lebanon’s financial and political elite.

The port blast, coming on top of the plutocrats’ “herd immunity” policies, has exposed the bankruptcy of the capitalist social order, which everywhere has proved incapable of lifting the working class and poor farmers out of poverty or providing the most basic democratic rights. The decisive question posed today for Lebanese workers, as for the working class around the world, is building an international revolutionary party that can lead the working class in the struggle against capitalism and the imperialist division of the Middle East into rival nation states, and for the socialist reorganisation of society.

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