

COVID-19 pandemic hits Lebanon, piling health crisis onto political and economic meltdown

By Jean Shaoul
16 April 2020

The coronavirus has hit Lebanon amid a spiraling political, economic and social crisis and causing widespread panic, food shortages and hardship.

While the number of confirmed cases and deaths is still relatively low, with some 658 cases and 21 deaths, according to official figures, Lebanon—one of the most heavily indebted countries in the world—faces meltdown.

Its corrupt political system, manipulated for decades by regional powers and French and US imperialism, has been paralysed for years. As a result of one of the earliest “experiments” in neo-liberalism, its venal bourgeoisie provides little in the way of health care for any but the elite.

Over 80 percent of the hospitals are private. Successive governments have slashed spending and failed to reimburse hospitals for their expenditure, so that now, with a severe US dollar shortage, there is an acute lack of life-saving medicines and key equipment. Those afflicted with the most severe form of the virus face almost certain death.

Last autumn, weeks of protest over the country’s deteriorating economic and social conditions led to the fall of the government headed by Prime Minister Saad Hariri, a political stooge of Saudi Arabia. On March 9, Hassan Diab, his successor, defaulted on a \$1.2 billion eurobond amid the onset of the coronavirus outbreak, later extending the default to all overseas debt. According to plans leaked to *Al-Jazeera*, he is seeking \$10 billion-\$15 billion in external financing in return for further privatisation, slashing of public salaries, tax hikes and an official devaluation of the Lebanese currency which has already fallen on the black market by 50 percent since September.

On March 15, Diab declared a state of emergency and introduced lockdown measures, bans on public transportation and night curfews, which served to close down both the economy and the ongoing protests—with security forces clearing protest camps in downtown Beirut. At the same time, Lebanon’s crowded inter-generational households provide the ideal conditions for the rapid

transmission of the virus.

Lebanon’s impoverished people, having lost their meagre income, now face hunger. Last November, well before the pandemic, the World Bank estimated that 45 percent of Lebanon’s 6 million people lived below the poverty line, up from 33 percent before September, and predicted the country’s bankruptcy would lead to a further rise to 50 percent in 2020. A massive 22 percent already live in extreme poverty.

Amid soaring inflation in food prices due to the de facto devaluation of the Lebanese pound and an expected shortage of wheat and other essential items, the government has announced it is to import 80,000 tonnes of wheat for the first time since 2014 and give some of the poorest families a one-off payment of \$150. But it is unclear how this small sum is to be distributed. A further \$12 million has been allocated to provide food and medicine for 100,000 vulnerable families, a tiny fraction of those in need.

The corruption and patronage networks of the major political parties have deeply discredited them, as witnessed by the popular slogan during the protests, “When we say all of you (should leave), we mean all of you.” They are now seeking to rally support by funding aid distribution and sanitising. Hezbollah and Amal, for example, have mobilised a team of 24,000 medical workers at a cost of \$1.75 million.

Facing destitution, some workers are starting to defy the lockdown. Last month, a taxi driver set fire to his car after being fined for flouting lockdown orders. A vendor in Tripoli threw his produce on the streets after the police ordered him to close. Drivers of shared taxis blocked the main Tripoli-Beirut highway several times after a ban on their operation.

Protests and riots have broken out in Lebanon’s prisons and detention centres as prisoners demanded to be released before they die in conditions that constitute a petri dish for the virus. Last week, security forces fired rubber bullets,

injuring at least four prisoners when a riot broke out in Tripoli's Qoubbeh prison. It came a day after an escape tunnel several metres in length was discovered at Zahle Prison in the eastern Bekaa Valley. While the government had earlier announced the release of up to a third of its 9,000 inmates—those with fewer than six months left in their sentences—none have yet been released.

Lebanon hosts the largest number of forcibly displaced people per capita in the world, some 1.5 to 2 million Syrian and 475,000 Palestinian refugees, who have been badly affected by recent discriminatory measures. Samir Geagea, leader of the far-right Lebanese Forces Party, has led efforts to target refugees as spreaders of the virus, poisoning the atmosphere to divide the working class as part of a broader alignment of Christian and Sunni politicians, backed by the US and Saudi Arabia, against Hezbollah, backed by Iran.

His xenophobic diatribe has been taken up by at least 21 municipalities that have imposed discriminatory restrictions on Syrian refugees. Eight municipalities have imposed longer curfews on Syrian refugees than Lebanese citizens, threatening Syrians with legal action and confiscation of their documentation if they violate the curfew. Undocumented people are ineligible for free testing for COVID-19 and have been ordered to pay as much as 750,000 Lebanese lira (approximately \$498) to cover the cost.

Lebanon has carried out few tests and is unable to obtain test kits due to the high international demand.

Many of the 250,000 migrants from Africa and Asia, employed mainly as domestic workers, are trapped in Lebanon by border closures, or are unable to afford a flight home. Others are effectively enslaved to employers who take away their passports. *Al-Arabiya* reported activist Zeina Ammar saying of domestic workers, "We've seen an increase in [suicide] cases, particularly emergency cases and requests for shelter and repatriation, during and caused by the economic crisis."

These terrible social conditions are replicated across the region, where the pandemic's human toll is likely to be catastrophic. The UN's Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), covering 18 Arab countries with a total population of 411 million, expects 8.3 million people to fall into poverty.

A further 2 million will become "undernourished." With the closure of schools, children's access to free school meal programmes has ended what was often the one nutritious meal of the day. This would bring the official number of people classified as poor to 101.4 million, a quarter of the population, and the "undernourished" to 52 million, likely a gross underestimate.

Mid-March, the agency was predicting job losses

approaching 2 million, a figure likely exceeded already, given the impact of plummeting oil prices and the closure of non-essential businesses, with the services sector, the region's main employment provider, particularly hard hit.

With little opportunity to earn a living outside the "informal" economy, which pays slave labour rates on a day-to-day basis, and without social insurance, the most vulnerable will be left without any means to survive, especially given the drastically curtailed remittances from family members overseas.

Some 26 million people in need are forcibly displaced—refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs)—one-third of the 71 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, thanks to decades of wars and conflicts sponsored by the major imperialist powers and their regional allies. Nearly 16 million of these are moderately to severely food insecure.

At least 12 million refugees and IDPs live in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, including 1 million people who have fled the recent fighting in Idlib. They join hundreds of thousands already displaced by the US-led war in Iraq, and refugees from conflicts in Sudan, South Sudan and Yemen. Many are trying to leave the camps that are nothing but death traps, with some even returning home.

The region also hosts millions of Palestinians displaced by the establishment of the State of Israel and the wars in 1948-49 and 1967, as well as Israel's repeated conflicts with Lebanon and Gaza.

The Norwegian Refugee Council has warned that the virus will "devastate these communities" as it hits millions of conflict-afflicted people living in overcrowded and unsanitary camps and settlements with little in the way of health care.

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