

Protester killed in Lebanon during riots against soaring food prices

By Jean Shaoul
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Lebanese armed forces have used live fire, rubber-coated rounds, and tear gas to disperse angry protesters, killing one man and injuring dozens more.

The shooting of 26-year-old Fawaz Fouad al-Samman occurred Monday night during the fourth day of nationwide demonstrations over the collapsing currency, soaring food prices and the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has claimed the lives of 24 people. Further clashes took Tuesday place after the funeral of the young man, whom protesters have called "the martyr of hunger." The protests started in the northern city of Tripoli, Lebanon's poorest, at the end of last week and spread rapidly across the country.

Defying the coronavirus lockdown, thousands of people blocked the main highways, setting fire to tyres, attacked banks and ATMs with Molotov cocktails and marched through the streets. Furious at the currency's rapid devaluation, which has sent the US dollar soaring and halved the value of their wages and savings, they have accused the banks of helping a corrupt political class drive the country towards bankruptcy.

On Monday, men, women and children marched through the streets of Tripoli, where more than half the population are living at or below the poverty line, shouting "Revolution, Revolution" and attacking banks and shops, triggering clashes with the security forces.

There were similar protests in the capital Beirut and Saida in the south, where protesters shouted "Molotov, Molotov, instead of a candle, Molotov" outside a local branch of the Central Bank, as well as towns in the Bekaa valley, with angry clashes with the security forces taking place throughout the night. The exchange shops also closed in protest over the "insane chaos" of the exchange rate devaluation. The main focus of the protests is hunger. In one widely shared video, a protester shouts, "I'm hungry" in Arabic at a security forces member, who then replies, "I'm hungrier than you."

The army for its part claimed that 40 soldiers had been wounded in Tripoli and other parts of the country when they were hit with stones thrown by protesters as they tried to reopen the blocked highways.

The protests had temporarily abated after the lockdown measures, bans on public transportation and night curfews imposed on March 15. They are a continuation of the widespread protest movement that started last October over deteriorating economic and social conditions, government corruption and sectarianism. Following the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who is closely aligned with Saudi Arabia, and the continuing economic and political paralysis, his successor Hassan Diab, who is supported by Hezbollah, which is allied with Iran and Syria, defaulted on a \$1.2 billion Eurobond amid the onset of the coronavirus outbreak, later extending the default to all overseas debt.

Any external loans to see Lebanon, one of the most heavily indebted countries in the world, over the crisis would be dependent upon the usual free market "reforms" that would plunge millions into destitution and require political alignment with the Sunni oil states against Iran.

Three days after the default, Diab declared a state of emergency, introduced lockdown measures to stem the spread of the coronavirus under conditions where there is little in the way of health care for any other than the ruling elite and despatched the security forces to clear the protest camps in downtown Beirut.

The lockdown in Lebanon's crowded inter-generational households serves not only to provide the ideal conditions for the rapid transmission of the virus but also to deprive most of the country's already impoverished people of the means of their existence.

Last year, even before the onset of the pandemic, the World Bank estimated that 45 percent of Lebanon's 6 million people lived below the poverty line and predicted the country's impending bankruptcy would lead to a

further rise to 50 percent in 2020.

More than 220,000 jobs have gone since the protests began in October. Social Affairs Minister Ramzi Musharrafieh admitted that up to 75 percent of the people are in need of aid, as people scrounge garbage dumps for food and beg passers-by for something to eat. The situation is even worse for Lebanon's most vulnerable communities—refugees and migrant workers—the overwhelming majority of whom lack food, with many fearing eviction.

As inflation soared and food prices rocketed due to the de facto devaluation of the Lebanese pound, fears mounted of a food shortage. Diab announced some paltry measures to help some of the poorest families but could not secure his cabinet's agreement on the terms, leaving people bereft of any means of subsistence. The crisis was further exacerbated by the fall-off in remittances from the Lebanese diaspora as the lockdowns and economic slump affected their jobs and wages.

For months, the banks—at the behest of the Central Bank—have limited the amount of withdrawals in both local and foreign currencies to \$200 a week, with the latter being phased out almost entirely, and banned foreign transfers. This led to long lines outside the banks as customers pleaded to be allowed to withdraw their money. While the pleas of ordinary people fell on deaf ears, the rich nevertheless managed to transfer some \$5.7 billion out of the banks, many of which are owned by prominent politicians, in January and February as a furious prime minister revealed over the weekend.

The Central Bank's action was little short of outright theft. It served not only to discriminate against the smaller depositors in favour of the rich, but also against Syrians who kept their money in Lebanon, enormously exacerbating the economic crisis in Syria, which was undoubtedly one of its aims.

Last week, the Central Bank's long-time director, Riad Salameh, who has implemented Washington's financial sanctions against Hezbollah, issued a directive reversing its policy without any consultation with the government. Those with foreign currency deposits would be allowed to withdraw their money in Lebanese pounds at a value to be set by the commercial banks—expected to be even lower than the black market rate of 3,400 pounds to the US dollar, in contrast to the official and unobtainable rate, set in 1997, of 1,500 pounds to the dollar.

This de facto devaluation was in turn expected to trigger a rapid rise in prices as the newly available cash flooded the market amid a dollar scarcity. This is what happened

on Friday, when the pound's value started plummeting catastrophically, from the already low of 3,400 pounds to the US dollar to 4,000, a fall of nearly 17 percent. Over the weekend, Lebanon's Central Bank intervened to prop up the currency, setting the exchange rate at 3,200 pounds to the dollar. All this has sparked a furious row between Diab and Salameh, with Diab suggesting that the bank governor had deliberately engineered the pound's crash.

On Monday, the government's last lifeline fell as Raymond Ghara, the energy minister, announced there were no commercially viable gas deposits in one of the 10 blocs claimed by Lebanon in the Levant basin. Successive governments have long hyped the prospect of finding gas as the solution to the country's economic woes, although even if the exploration had been successful, it would take years to come on stream. As it is, the collapse in oil prices has all but scuppered the viability of Cyrus, Egypt and Israel's gas fields and put paid to any hopes of exploring any of Lebanon's other blocs.

Facing destitution with the onset of the lockdown, some workers started challenging the government in individual acts of defiance and isolated protests. On April 17, hundreds defied the 7 p.m. curfew in Tripoli and demonstrated to mark six months since the start of the mass rallies against government corruption and economic hardship. Angry protesters hurled rocks at the security forces, who used tear gas to disperse the crowds. Last week, protesters took to the streets to voice their disapproval of the government as parliament met for the first time since the coronavirus outbreak.

These initial protests have now morphed into a nationwide outburst of anger that the government, which represents the interests of Lebanon's billionaires and upper echelons of its numerous sects, has neither the will nor the capacity to placate. While the government has allowed some businesses to reopen and shortened the night-time curfew, this will do nothing to alleviate the plight of millions of workers and their families.

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