

Massive explosion in Beirut kills dozens and injures thousands

By Kevin Reed
5 August 2020

Dozens of people were killed and thousands injured by a massive explosion on Tuesday evening in Beirut, Lebanon that flattened the city's port district and damaged buildings as far away as six miles.

Numerous smartphone videos shared on social media and published by news organizations show a large fire at a port warehouse with a white column of smoke billowing into the blue sky above Beirut followed by a terrifying blast that emits a giant mushroom cloud and a shock wave that engulfs everything in its path.

A report by the Associated Press said that the blast struck with the force of a 3.5 magnitude earthquake, according to Germany's geosciences center GFZ, "and it was heard and felt as far away as Cyprus more than 200 kilometers (180 miles) across the Mediterranean."

Other reports said the large number of injured in need of emergency medical attention are overwhelming area hospitals and officials were making public pleas for blood donations. The *Guardian* reported at 7:30 pm US Eastern Time that there were two explosions in Beirut and that Lebanon's health minister Hamad Hassan confirmed that at least 78 people were killed and 4,000 injured.

The *Guardian* report said: "The final death toll from the biggest explosion to ever rock Beirut is expected to be significantly higher than the figures given in its immediate aftermath. Georges Kettaneh, a Lebanese Red Cross official, said more deaths were expected when rescue teams combed through damaged buildings."

Although the cause of the blast is still to be officially identified, Abbas Ibrahim, chief of Lebanese General Security, told news media that it may have been the product of highly explosive material that was stored at the Beirut port after it was confiscated from a ship.

A tweet from an account identified with the Lebanese

Presidency quoted Prime Minister Hassan Diab as saying, "It is unacceptable that a shipment of ammonium nitrate estimated at 2,750 tons has been present for six years in a warehouse without taking preventive measures that endanger the safety of citizens."

Ammonium nitrate, a chemical used in fertilizer production, is a powerful explosive. By comparison, the Oklahoma City bombers used 2 tons of ammonium nitrate to detonate the deadly explosion that killed 168 people at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in 1995.

A BBC report said, "Prime Minister Hassan Diab called it a catastrophe and said those responsible must be held to account. He spoke of a 'dangerous warehouse' which had been there since 2014 but said he would not pre-empt the investigation."

The AP said that local TV stations reported that a fireworks warehouse had caught on fire and that "the fire then appeared to spread to a nearby building, triggering a more massive explosion ..."

The AP report went on: "One of Israel's top bomb experts, Boaz Hayoun, said fireworks could have been a factor setting off the bigger blast. 'Before the big explosion ... in the center of the fire, you can see sparks, you can hear sounds like popcorn and you can hear whistles,' said Hayoun, owner of the Tamar Group, which works closely with the Israeli government on safety and certification issues involving explosives."

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the Trump administration is closely monitoring the situation. "Our team in Beirut has reported to me the extensive damage to a city and a people that I hold dear, an additional challenge in a time of already deep crisis," Pompeo said in a written statement.

Pompeo’s reference is concerning the deep economic and financial crisis that has overtaken Lebanon—including a collapsing currency, soaring inflation and expanding poverty—accompanied by the intensification of sectarian conflict, all of which has been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

Speaking about the events in Lebanon during a White House press briefing on Tuesday evening, President Donald Trump said that the explosion “looks like a terrible attack.” Trump added: “I’ve met with some of our great generals and they just seem to feel that it was not a—some kind of manufacturing explosion type of event. This was a—seems to be according to them, they would know better than I would, but they seem to think it was an attack. It was a bomb of some kind.”

Trump offered no further evidence or explanation of his statement, which contradicts the position of Lebanese officials.

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