

Massive anger erupts following Beirut port explosion

By Jean Shaoul
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Security forces used tear gas to disperse anti-government protesters near the parliament buildings in downtown Beirut Thursday, as anger and frustration at successive governments' responsibility for the massive port explosion erupted.

Demonstrators shouted "Revolution," the slogan of last October's protests demanding an end to social inequality, government mismanagement, corruption and the sectarian political system imposed in the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war of 1975–89 that handed the country over to various warlords.

The Beirut explosion and fires have killed at least 157 people and injured 5,000 others, of whom at least 1,000 require hospital treatment in Lebanon's already overwhelmed health care system, and 120 are in a critical condition.

With many listed as missing on social media, the number of victims will only rise as rescue workers and family members sift through the rubble of the tens of thousands of buildings that have been destroyed or damaged.

Some 300,000 people, 12 percent of the city's population, were made homeless as the force of the blast blew buildings apart and shattered windows, and fires raged, leaving much of Beirut like a warzone. Officials have estimated losses at \$10 billion to \$15 billion.

The tragic outcome is an 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.

The protests grew as thousands took to the streets yesterday, with mass rallies planned for today against the government of Prime Minister Hassan Diab, brought to power earlier this year after months-long protests brought down the government of Saad Hariri.

A former engineering professor at the American University of Beirut with no political affiliations, Diab

was appointed to head a "technocratic" government in an attempt to stem protests, following a long line of billionaires and scions of Lebanon's ruling dynasties in recent years. No more able to resolve the country's longstanding economic, social and political problems, he defaulted on a \$1.2 billion Eurobond in March and is seeking a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Tuesday's catastrophic explosions engulfed the port area of Beirut and residential areas to the east of the city. The massive blast, one fifth as powerful as that produced by the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima 75 years ago, was apparently triggered by welding work on a warehouse hangar adjacent to residential neighbourhoods. The storage depot had been storing 2,750 tons of highly explosive ammonium nitrate for years, without proper safety controls.

The powerful chemical, used as mine explosives and in fertilizer production, had been stored there since the authorities impounded a defective ship transporting the cargo from Georgia to Mozambique after its owner absconded, despite orders for its removal and repeated warnings about the danger. A similar explosion in the Chinese port of Tianjin in 2015 killed 173 people and injured hundreds of others.

The government said that 16 officials who knew about the ammonium nitrate, including port and customs officials, judges, and former ministers, were under house arrest and/or subject to a travel ban, but it has not released their names. The central bank has reportedly frozen the accounts belonging to the head of Beirut's port, the director of Lebanese customs, and five other officials.

President Michel Aoun has set up an investigation into the blast, which will look at whether "external interference" in addition to negligence was a factor, to report within four days. This was a nod in the direction of those who have sought to attribute the blast to the

Iran-backed bourgeois clerical group Hezbollah, saying that the warehouse was an explosives dump for the group that prompted an air strike by Israel, with whom Lebanon has been in a state of war for decades.

None of these measures has done anything to reassure the public. Anger against the political elite has only intensified as the government has announced no measures to help the bereaved or the homeless. Such is their distrust of all the politicians and official institutions that relief organisations in Lebanon have called on individuals and governments alike to donate directly through them to bypass the corrupt politicians.

Not one minister has been to visit the stricken areas, let alone comfort the bereaved and homeless families, doubtless in fear for their lives. Politicians who have appeared in public, including former Prime Minister Saad Hariri and Justice Minister Mari-Claude Najm, were booed. Angry demonstrators told Hariri, “Don’t you even think of returning to power,” while Najm was showered with water.

The damage to the port, one of the busiest in the eastern Mediterranean that handles 60 percent of the country’s imports, will have devastating consequences for Lebanon, causing shortages of essential items such as food, fuel and medical supplies. The fire has also damaged or destroyed the grain terminal and the silos that normally hold 85 percent of the country’s cereals, with the potential to cause an immense food shortage.

But the ramifications spread far beyond Lebanon. Beirut is also the port of entry for food and basic commodities heading to Syria, which then transports goods overland to Jordan, under conditions where Israel’s ports are off limits to both Lebanon and Syria and Lebanon’s northern port of Tripoli is too small to replace Beirut.

The country of 6 million people, including 2 million refugees, was already reeling under the impact of its worst ever economic and financial crisis—including a currency that has lost 80 percent of its value in recent weeks, soaring inflation, the doubling of food prices, job losses and widespread and ever-expanding poverty, all exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

On Thursday, French President Emmanuel Macron, visited the country, the first international figure to do so. This representative of the former colonial power in Lebanon and Syria and suppressor of the year-long “yellow vest” protests in France walked through the historic neighbourhood of Gemmayzeh, home to Lebanon’s wealthy Christian and Sunni citizens.

His mission, ostensibly to offer aid, was in reality to ensure that Lebanon’s elite intervene to organize a counterrevolution against the working class and engineer the elimination of the Iran-backed bourgeois clerical group Hezbollah as a political and military force in Lebanon and Syria.

A report in *Haaretz* cited those enthusiastically greeting Macron stating, “Mr. President, you’re on General Gouraud Street, he freed us from the Ottomans. Free us from the current authorities.” Others shouted, “Mr. Macron, free us from Hezbollah.” A petition calling for Lebanon to be put under a French mandate garnered 55,000 signatures in 24 hours.

Macron’s promise to deliver urgent international aid was conditional upon the demand for “radical political reform” aimed at channelling the legitimate anger of Lebanese workers behind French imperialism’s local stooges. Claiming he would “never interfere in Lebanese politics,” but seek a “new political deal” from the country’s leaders, pressing hard for change, he said, “I will hold them accountable.”

There is a real danger that in the absence of a revolutionary leadership advancing a perspective for unifying the working class that protests initially opposing sectarian politics and social inequality will again be diverted along reactionary lines as in Egypt in 2011–13.

The demands of the masses of Lebanese workers and youth, like those of workers who have risen in revolt across the region, in Europe, the US and elsewhere, are diametrically opposed to those of their political leaders. They cannot be resolved outside of the struggle by the Lebanese working class alongside their class brothers and sisters internationally for the overthrow of capitalism and the building of socialism in the Middle East and on a world scale.

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