

Lebanese government resigns amid mounting anger over port blast

By Jean Shaoul
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Lebanon's Prime Minister Hassan Diab announced his government's resignation in a televised address to the nation yesterday evening.

The move came amid mounting fury over last Tuesday's catastrophic explosion in one of Beirut's port warehouses storing 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate.

There were angry demonstrations over the weekend leading to violent clashes when security forces fired tear gas and rubber bullets at protesters and injured more than 700 people.

Announcing the government's resignation, Diab said he had come to the conclusion that corruption in Lebanon is "bigger than the state." He added that "This crime" was a result of endemic corruption and called for the trial of those responsible for the deadly blast. He said he was taking "a step back" so he could stand with the people "and fight the battle for change alongside them."

Diab laid the blame for the "earthquake" that had hit Lebanon on his government's corrupt predecessors, saying, "They [the political class] should have been ashamed of themselves because their corruption is what has led to this disaster that had been hidden for seven years."

It is reported that Diab will stay on in a caretaker role. On Saturday, he had announced early parliamentary elections, saying he would stay on for two months.

The government's resignation followed the resignation of several ministers, including his closest ally, Environment and Administrative Development Minister Damianos Kattar, who cited the government's inability to carry out reforms.

While the blast's immediate cause has not been confirmed, the disaster was the result of the criminal neglect and callous indifference displayed by successive governments and the ruling elite. For years, they ignored repeated warnings about the dangers of storing such a powerful chemical without proper safety controls so near to residential areas.

According to Beirut's Governor Marwan Abboud, the death toll from the explosion has risen to 220, with 110 people still missing, many of whom are believed to be

foreign workers and lorry drivers, making identifying them more difficult. More than 6,000 people have been injured. The army has called off the rescue operation at the port because no survivors had been found.

Fully twelve percent of the city's population—300,000 people—have seen their homes destroyed or damaged by the blast that blew up buildings, shattered windows and set neighbourhoods ablaze. Officials have estimated losses at \$10 billion to \$15 billion.

With no other shelter available, people are being forced to sleep in severely damaged homes, many without windows or doors. Speaking to the BBC, Rona Halabi, a spokeswoman for the International Committee of the Red Cross, said, "These people need shelter, they need food... they also need cleaning detergents, they need help in picking up what is left of their homes."

She pointed out that the blast had caused heavy damage to two water and electricity stations, under conditions where lengthy power outages were already a daily occurrence.

Last week, President Michel Aoun announced an investigation into the cause of the blast, including whether any "external interference" in addition to negligence was a factor. A report is to be forthcoming within four days. Some 20 leading officials are reportedly under house arrest, while others have had their bank accounts frozen.

A judge has begun questioning Maj. Gen. Tony Saliba, who heads State Security. Apparently State Security had compiled a report about the dangers of storing the material at the port and sent a copy to the offices of the president and prime minister on July 20.

Diab, an engineering professor, was installed as a "technocrat" to head the government in January after mass social protests against economic hardship, government corruption and the country's sectarian political setup forced the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri, Washington, Paris and Riyadh's man in Lebanon.

Diab's cabinet, many of whom were professional people not politically aligned with the main political parties, had the support of the Iran-backed group Hezbollah, which with its

allies has the largest political bloc in Parliament.

This earned his government the undying hatred of the Christian and Sunni plutocrats allied with Hariri's Future Movement, which refused to cooperate with the government, leading to the eruption of small but violent clashes between the two rival blocs in recent months. Last June, President Aoun warned that this could spark another civil war in a country that saw a bitter armed conflict between shifting alliances backed by external forces from 1975 to 1990.

The port explosion comes amidst an unprecedented economic and financial crisis exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic that has seen tourism revenues and remittances from the Gulf and the Lebanese diaspora plummet. The ensuing lockdown caused untold suffering among workers, refugees and migrants. The only limited social safety net is provided by sectarian-based parties, and health care is dependent upon the ability to pay exorbitant prices.

In March, the government defaulted on a \$1.2 billion Eurobond, later extending it to all its overseas debt, as the collapse of the lira wiped out the foreign currency reserves of the heavily indebted country, fuelling inflation and widespread poverty.

Days later, after declaring a state of emergency, the government announced that the central bank would pump dollars into the market to prop up the currency and that it was preparing an appeal to the US-dominated International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a loan. Any such loan would be tied to the usual demand for "free market reforms" that would plunge millions into destitution and cut across key and conflicting interests of the ruling elite.

But above all, an IMF loan would be contingent upon political alignment with the Sunni oil states, with whom relations have cooled over the last six years. Such an alignment would be directed against Iran and, by extension, Syria, conditions that are anathema to Hezbollah. Without acceding to the IMF's terms, loans pledged at an aid conference by the European and regional powers in 2018 would not be forthcoming.

In addition, last year the US widened its sanctions against Hezbollah, which it has designated as a terrorist organisation, targeting legislators as well as a local bank, forcing it to close, thereby adding to Lebanon's already severe financial and economic crisis.

Last June, the US's Caesar Act came into effect, imposing sanctions against the Syrian government and those dealing with it, thereby further undermining Hezbollah's finances and preventing Lebanon from purchasing Syrian oil.

Washington, Riyadh and Paris have sought to exert "maximum economic pressure" on Beirut, implementing

what amounts to a blockade against the country for the purpose of eliminating Hezbollah as a political and military force in Lebanon and Syria as part of their broader campaign against Iran. Their aim is to engineer a return to power by their local agents, the Sunni Future Movement of Hariri and his allies.

On Sunday, French President Macron continued the pressure. Co-hosting a virtual conference with the UN that pledged nearly \$300 million in emergency humanitarian aid to Beirut, mainly for health care, education, food and housing, he warned that "it would be strictly monitored." He added that no money for rebuilding the city would be made available until Lebanon committed itself to implementing political and economic reforms. The forces organising the demonstrations of recent days include the Christian and Sunni parties and ex-generals around Hariri's US-aligned Future Movement. They are calling for the formation of an interim "salvation" government, "potentially headed by the military" and including bankers and other business figures, to "resolve the humanitarian and economic crisis," and prepare the way for elections on the basis of a new electoral law—in as much as three years' time. Their aim is to restore the direct rule of the plutocracy, in the service of imperialism, and limit or eradicate the influence of the "mobsters" in Lebanon and Syria—a euphemism for Hezbollah.

This points to the very real dangers that the legitimate anger of workers, youth and middle-class layers engulfed by the ever-widening crisis will be channelled behind yet another bunch of kleptocrats, this time possibly headed by military generals, and directed against the impoverished supporters of Hezbollah and its allies.

What is absolutely decisive in the present situation is the building of a new revolutionary leadership, advancing a perspective for unifying the working class across all religious, sectarian, national and ethnic divisions, not just in Lebanon but across the region, in the struggle for the overthrow of capitalism and the building of the United Socialist States of the Middle East as part of a world federation of socialist states. This requires building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International throughout the region.

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