Lebanon's humanitarian crisis escalates after the Beirut blast

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Lebanon is a fragile state whose political elite have long neglected to protect its people. With the Aug 4, 2020, devastating explosion in Beirut, Lebanon's dire health and humanitarian crises have escalated. The blast left 190 dead and more than 6500 injured. Senior Lebanese officials reportedly knew for 6 years of ammonium nitrate storage at Beirut Port but failed to act,2 showing blatant disregard for public safety. The destruction from the explosion has been widespread, with about 40% of Beirut severely damaged, leaving around 300 000 residents with devastated dwellings.3 According to WHO reports, impacts on health infrastructure include three hospitals rendered non-functional, three substantially damaged, 500 hospital bed equivalents lost, and many primary care facilities damaged.4 Essential food and medical supplies were also affected, including damage to grain silos and the destruction of 17 containers of medical supplies and a shipment of personal protective equipment.^{3,4} Other infrastructures, including roads, businesses, educational facilities, and cultural heritage buildings have also sustained damage.3 Initial World Bank estimates cost the physical damage at US\$3.8-4.6 billion and economic losses at \$2.9-3.5 billion.5 The blast has generated a new humanitarian emergency in Lebanon.

Lebanon's context is one of chronic development challenges. The country's health, social, and transport systems are overburdened and its infrastructures struggle to accommodate growing population needs and the influx of more than 1 million Syrian refugees since the beginning of the Syrian conflict. Corruption is rife. Long-standing economic and fiscal mismanagement have rendered Lebanon the third most indebted country in the world. Clientelism and widespread wasta (favours by personal connections) offered by political factions in exchange for allegiances and a confessional, sectarian political system have generated entrenched structural inequalities.

Political and economic mismanagement had set Lebanon on a trajectory towards a health and humanitarian disaster long before the explosion.⁹ The scale of the country's political and economic crises led to widespread protests for political reform in 2019. Exacerbated by the impact of sanctions and dwindling US dollar reserves, Lebanon's economy has been in freefall, with the currency devalued by around 80%,

hyperinflation, and extreme capital control measures imposed by banks.¹⁰ Foreign currency shortages curtailed imports and in June, 2020, food price inflation approached 200%, with rising food insecurity and hunger and fears of possible famine within months.¹¹ Widespread shortages of essential medicines together with lay-offs and emigration of health personnel have reduced hospital services.¹²⁻¹⁴ In July, 2020, there were reports that calls to Lebanon's suicide hotlines had increased.¹⁵ The estimated head-count poverty rate in Lebanon increased from 28% in 2019 to 55% in May, 2020, with 23% of the population in extreme poverty.¹⁶ These figures are expected to soar further after the explosion with continuing inflation and as Lebanon's middle class contracts and emigrates.¹⁶

COVID-19 and country-wide lockdowns further exacerbated the political and economic turmoil. Lebanon adopted an early and aggressive COVID-19 containment strategy, followed by phased reopening in late April, 2020.17 Lebanon reopened its airport early, on July 1, 2020, a measure necessary both for repatriation and remittance flows. Poor compliance and weak enforcement of guarantine led to a surge in COVID-19 case numbers and Lebanon re-entered partial lockdown in late July, 2020. In the acute blast emergency, its aftermath, and the protests that followed, compliance with social distancing and COVID-19 containment measures waned.¹⁴ COVID-19 cases have tripled in the month since the blast,18 with a cumulative total of 21324 cases and 200 deaths as of Sept 8, 2020.19 COVID-19 cases are also occurring among health workers.20 A lockdown reimposed after the blast was eased within days due to economic pressures. Lebanon's health system capacity is now under real threat.

The state continues to fail in its obligations. In the wake of the explosion, the state was noticeably absent from hazardous clean-up efforts. Instead, Lebanon's citizens took to the streets to remove debris, demonstrating community solidarity, resourcefulness, and strength, akin to that seen during the 2006 war in Lebanon.²¹ The Lebanese people have had to rebuild from rubble many times. Widely hailed for their resilience and ability to overcome recurrent adversities, the Lebanese have endured enough, and their resilience is not reason for ongoing lack of political accountability and reform.²²



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The impacts of these recurrent assaults are widely felt, from those experiencing yet another collective trauma, giving rise to mental health problems and need for psychological support, 3,20,23 to those in the diaspora who are offering support and resources but describe helplessness and disempowerment in supporting their country of origin.24

After the explosion, humanitarian aid has started flowing. An international donor conference mobilised almost US\$300 million to be coordinated by the UN in Lebanon with longer-term support contingent on reform.25 This situation is both a dilemma and a rare opportunity for Lebanon. While assistance for any country in crisis should normally flow through, or in coordination with, state institutions, in Lebanon most such institutions are deeply mistrusted8 and not well placed to lead humanitarian assistance efforts. Local civil society must be empowered to manage and monitor the response and the international humanitarian support. The international humanitarian community should not drive the assistance or undermine genuine reform efforts needed to allow the state to reclaim its role in public service provision, yet aid flow must not extend a financial lifeline to the status quo. New initiatives are emerging to track and assess the transparency and effectiveness of emergency assistance and humanitarian response, such as the Beirut Blast Recovery and Reconstruction Monitor²⁶ and Khaddit Beirut (Beirut Blast). Lebanon's diaspora has an important role, both through provision of remittances and in rebuilding and supporting Lebanon's human capacity and its ravaged infrastructure. It should also support Lebanon's efforts towards reform.

The explosion in Beirut must serve as a trigger for change, and all Lebanese need to play their parts to ensure we build back better. Health advocacy can also be a tool towards broader political and social change.²⁷ Ultimately, governance overhaul and transparent implementation of policy and institutional reforms will be crucial for effective rebuilding.⁵ This necessitates constitutional reform and a non-partisan independent investigation into Lebanon's gross long-standing mismanagement. The Lebanese political establishment has failed its people, and the lives lost through this most recent tragedy must not be in vain.

IN is a founding member of Khaddit Beirut (Beirut Blast). We declare no other competing interests.

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