

Beirut explodes

BY ARAB NGO NETWORK FOR DEVELOPMENT (ANND)

On 4 August 2020, Beirut was hit by an explosion that killed over 200 people, wounded several thousand and led to billions of dollars in economic losses, as the country goes through a deep economic, financial and social crisis, putting its economy on the brink of total collapse.

The social repercussions of the explosion are major. Around 300,000 families lost their homes, businesses and livelihoods. The fragile food security situation brought about by the financial crisis and COVID-19 has become more precarious following the destruction of the granaries and all the imported goods stored at the port. The health sector faces a major crisis, due to the damage caused to three major private hospitals in Beirut, which had to suspend their work, leading to a significant decrease in the city's healthcare capacity, dependent for the most part on private sector facilities. Furthermore, COVID-19 cases have been rising rapidly and warehouses storing the medications distributed freely by the Ministry of Health and international organizations were destroyed.

The explosion was caused by the presence of 2,750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate stored at the Beirut port since 2014, without

any attempts to move it, despite warnings of the danger. Consecutive governments, the Port of Beirut, customs and security forces had knowledge of the presence of dangerous chemicals at the port. "The explosion, thus, was not an accident," wrote Lebanese civil society organizations (CSOs) in a letter to international organizations. "It is a blatant crime for which responsibility falls on the political, security and administrative authorities overseeing the work of the port, appointed and protected by political forces."

Lebanon was already in the middle of an unprecedented crisis. Dollar exchange rates have been soaring as the country faces hyperinflation (with inflation rates reaching 50% a month).

"The real reason is that throughout all of the crises that have befallen the country since the end of the civil war, the failed political class has been sharing the spoils and accumulating wealth," argue the Lebanese CSOs. Therefore, "people in Lebanon have lost trust in the authorities and the current government, which they hold responsible for the explosion. There is absolutely no trust in any investigation by authorities that failed to solve much simpler crises or prosecute those responsible for the

disasters afflicting Lebanon and its people. Those responsible for the catastrophe should not be in charge of the investigation of its causes or recovering from its effects, including receiving aid, managing relief operation, renovation or reconstruction."¹

The Lebanese people responded immediately to this disaster. Hundreds of individual and collective initiatives and thousands of volunteers from all regions ran down to the affected areas to provide assistance. The inaction and absence of State institutions was a reminder of previous crises. "This comprehensive popular solidarity is Lebanon's true wealth. It is the one that must be built upon, strengthened, and provided with support to overcome this crisis far from the institutions of corruption, clientelism, and political parading."

The civil society organizations call for an "immediate, impartial, independent and transparent international investigation to determine the parties responsible and the causes of deaths and injuries". They demand "the accountability of those responsible for the presence, transportation, storage

¹ See the whole statement at <http://www.annd.org/>

and handling of these materials in the port and the failure to take the necessary measures to ensure the safety and life of the Lebanese people over the past years.” And they call “on the UN and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) to develop greater cooperation and coordination, based on the wide

network of national and local aid and development organizations providing aid to those in Lebanon. There should be more reliance on local organizations, associations and initiatives to respond to relief and assistance needs in transparent ways.”