

Beirut port fire: A crime against Lebanese workers

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The catastrophic fire that engulfed the port area of Beirut Tuesday afternoon has fuelled the long-standing anger towards Lebanon's ultra-rich ruling class.

The blast is a damning indictment of Lebanon's political elite, which allowed vast quantities of highly explosive ammonium nitrate to be stored in a wharfside warehouse for years without proper safety controls.

It is one of a number of recent disasters across the world that were entirely foreseeable and preventable, which collectively constitute a searing indictment of capitalism and of the world's ruling elites—including the Grenfell Tower inferno in London in 2017, the 2013 collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Dhaka, Bangladesh, BP's 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, and, most deadly of all, the coronavirus pandemic.

The fire that followed two massive explosions has killed at least 135 people and injured 5,000 others. Those killed and missing include Lebanese soldiers, firefighters and first responders. These numbers are expected to rise as rescue workers sift through the rubble of the tens of thousands of buildings that have been destroyed or damaged.

As the brown haze and fumes from the massive explosions lifted, Beirut appeared as a war zone, with destruction more extensive than after weeks of intensive shelling during Lebanon's civil war of 1975-1989. The damage has extended across half the city, at a cost estimated at \$3 billion, with 300,000 people now homeless, according to the city's governor, Marwan Abboud, in a city where housing was already in short supply.

The poorly equipped health care system, already overwhelmed by the coronavirus pandemic, has suffered damage to several of its hospitals. Inundated with patients, medical workers are being forced to

triage patients outside, while the Red Cross is working with the government to set up morgues.

Although the cause of the blast is still to be officially identified, senior officials told news agencies that the probable cause was the ammonium nitrate, stored at the port's Warehouse 12, which ignited after welding work set fire to the warehouse.

The chemical was being stored after it was confiscated from the *Rhosus*, a Moldovan-flagged ship, in 2014. According to the *Guardian*, the ship was owned by Teto Shipping, whose owner-manager Igor Grechushkin, a Russian national, is believed to be living in Cyprus. He abandoned the ship that had been sailing from Georgia to Mozambique via Beirut after a dispute with the port authorities, leaving his sailors stranded with wages unpaid for nearly a year.

The ship's former captain sent a letter in 2014 to Russian journalists complaining about being "held hostage" on board the ship. He wrote that the Beirut authorities "don't want an abandoned ship at port, especially with a cargo of explosives, which is what ammonium nitrate is. That is, this is a floating bomb, and the crew is a hostage aboard this bomb."

Yet it took a year before the crew were released from the ship and the ammonium nitrate was confiscated and warehoused.

Ammonium nitrate is a powerful chemical, normally used in fertiliser production and mine explosives. Its dangers are well known. The deadly risks of storing it in a port were tragically confirmed in 2015, when a series of explosions, one of which involved the detonation of about 336 tons of ammonium nitrate, killed 173 people and injured hundreds of others at a container storage depot at the Chinese port of Tianjin. Fires caused by the initial explosions continued to burn, resulting in further explosions.

The amount of ammonium nitrate stored at the port of Beirut was far greater. Prime Minister Hassan Diab tweeted, “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.”

The explosion produced was a fifth as powerful as that produced by the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

Diab declared three days of national mourning for the victims of the explosion, made the usual promises about bringing those responsible to justice and promised they would “pay the price.” He called on “friendly countries” to help.

Leading officials at the port and customs authorities are reportedly under house arrest. The government has now declared a state of emergency, placing Beirut under military law for the next two weeks.

Diab’s announcement did nothing to stop US President Donald Trump declaring at a press conference on Tuesday that the explosion “looks like a terrible attack.”

He said that the US military thought it was the result of a bomb, a suggestion the Pentagon sought to distance itself from. Trump’s baseless remarks indicate the degree to which he is prepared to attribute any event to terrorism, to be used as a potential *casus belli*. One can only imagine his response had the explosion occurred in China or Russia, let alone in the US.

According to Reuters, despite several investigations and official orders to remove the chemical from the warehouse, nothing was done. An unnamed official familiar with the first investigation said, “It is negligence,” adding that the issue of safely storing the powerful chemical had come before several committees and judges and “nothing was done” to order the material removed or disposed of.

Reuters cited another source as saying that a team that had inspected the material six months ago warned it could “blow up all of Beirut” if not removed.

The blast will have devastating economic, social and political consequences. Diab’s government, brought to power after last October’s mass protests against poverty, government mismanagement, corruption and political sectarianism, was already subject to repeated demands to stand down.

The country of 6 million people, including 2 million refugees, is 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 and widespread and ever-expanding poverty, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

Last November, well before the pandemic, the World Bank estimated that 45 percent of Lebanon’s people lived below the poverty line, up from 33 percent before September, with 22 percent living in extreme poverty. It predicted the country’s impending bankruptcy would lead to a further rise to 50 percent in 2020.

The damage to the port is likely to cause shortages of essential items such as food, fuel, and medical supplies as the country imports most basic commodities. The port handles 60 percent of Lebanon’s imports, which the northern port of Tripoli is ill-equipped to replace under conditions where the country is bounded by war-torn Syria and Israel, with whom it is officially still in a state of war.

The fire has damaged or destroyed the grain terminal and the silos that normally hold 85 percent of the country’s cereals, largely from Russia and Ukraine, although its stocks were considerably lower than usual due to a widespread shortage of bread during the pandemic.

Last April, amid an expected shortage of wheat and other essential items, the government warned of an impending food shortage and announced it would import extra wheat on its own account—most wheat is imported by private mills—the first time since 2014. It was unclear how it would pay for this, given Lebanon’s shortage of foreign currency reserves.

The destruction of the port’s granary has left the country, which imports more than 80 percent of its grains, with less than a month’s reserves. This did not stop Raoul Nehmen, the economy minister, claiming Wednesday, “There is no bread or flour crisis,” and “We have enough inventory and boats on their way to cover the needs of Lebanon on the long term.”



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