

Lethal crackdown on protests as Lebanon's economy collapses amid pandemic surge

Jean Shaoul**29 January 2021**

Security forces used lethal force to disperse demonstrators in the northern port city of Tripoli, Lebanon's poorest city. At least two people died, and hundreds were injured during several nights of riots.

Angry protests and clashes with security forces erupted Monday as workers, furious at the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic, poured onto the streets of Tripoli and other cities around the country. A 24/7 curfew has worsened an already calamitous economic situation for working people.

The protests spread rapidly across the country, including the capital Beirut where protesters set fire to tyres near the parliament, and the eastern Bekaa Valley and the southern towns of Jiyeh and Tyre. Demonstrators blocked major roads on Tuesday and Wednesday night.

The protests followed caretaker Prime Minister Hassan Diab's January 14 announcement of a stringent round-the-clock nationwide curfew in a desperate attempt to control a surge of COVID-19 cases. The country of nearly 6 million people has reported almost 300,000 infections and 2,680 deaths, widely assumed to be a gross underestimate given the lack of testing facilities.

Healthcare services, already inadequate, have collapsed, with severely understaffed hospitals unable to treat patients. At least three hospitals were destroyed in the August 4 explosion at Beirut port. Hundreds of medical staff have emigrated, while those who remain are getting reduced salaries that are often paid late. Volunteers are filling the gaps. Hospitals are running out of breathing devices and oxygen supplies. There are reports of patients queuing outside hospitals for hours until their families take them home again. Patients who are admitted must bring their own food and bedding, and many who need ventilators are unable to get connected.

The lockdown was implemented without any economic support under conditions where at least 55 percent of the population are living in poverty and 25 percent in extreme

poverty following the country's economic and financial collapse and the pandemic restrictions. Last year, the economy contracted by 19 percent. As the Lebanese pound lost 80 percent of its value, causing the price of medical supplies, pharmaceuticals and imported foods to soar, the banks prevented small depositors from accessing their savings, even as their value plummeted.

Tens of thousands of people have lost their jobs—the unemployment rate is now 30 percent—while thousands of street traders and day labourers have lost their livelihoods. People are dependent upon remittances—accounting for a massive 36 percent of GDP—from family abroad, mainly in the Gulf States, which fell by more than 6 percent last year.

France24 reported that angry crowds gathered outside the homes of some of Lebanon's top politicians in Tripoli on Thursday, torching rubbish and smashing surveillance cameras. Omar Qarhani, an unemployed father of six, said, "We want to burn down all their houses the way they burned our hearts. Let any politician dare to walk on the streets of Tripoli." He said that the city's politicians had done almost nothing to help, adding "They have shamed this city."

Following a partial lockdown earlier in the month enforced via hundreds of police checkpoints and thousands of fines, the 24 hour curfew has now been extended to February 8. No one is allowed out, even to buy food or essential medical supplies. People are dependent on home deliveries by the grocery stores, a service not widely available, especially in the poorest neighbourhoods.

The Lebanese Health Ministry's first shipment of the Pfizer vaccine is not expected to arrive before the end of next month and at best will only vaccinate one fifth of the population of nearly seven million.

This latest crackdown on protesters coincides with the publication of a report by the London-based human rights

group Amnesty International, the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Essex in the UK, that calls on France, the former colonial power, to halt weapons sales to Lebanon. It says that a range of French-manufactured rubber bullets, pepper sprays, tear gas grenades—some even of military grade—and launchers had played a “shameful” role in suppressing peaceful demonstrations in the country between 2015 and 2020.

Amnesty accused Lebanon’s security forces of firing tear gas canisters directly at protesters and shooting rubber bullets at chest-level during anti-government protests between October 2019 and August 2020, leading to serious injuries to the head, eyes and upper body.

Lebanon’s economic crisis is rooted in decades of corruption and looting by the ruling elite that has created one of the world’s most heavily indebted countries, with a sovereign debt equal to 170 percent of GDP, owed in the main to Lebanese banks owned by leading Sunni and Christian politicians.

In October 2019, mass protests against poverty and the government’s rampant corruption and mismanagement of the economy swept the country, forcing billionaire Sa’ad Hariri’s coalition government to resign. Diab, an engineering professor, was chosen by President Michel Aoun to head a “technocratic” and “independent” government in January 2020. His government had the support of Hezbollah—the largest parliamentary bloc—President Aoun’s Christian Free Patriotic Movement, and the Shi’ite Amal Movement led by Nabih Berri, the parliament’s speaker.

The Christian and Sunni oligarchs allied with Hariri’s Future Movement were bitterly opposed to the government and it suited them to obstruct its work at every turn and blame Diab and Hezbollah for the economic crisis, the country’s default on its sovereign debt and their failure to carry out any measures to alleviate poverty and social distress.

The lockdown measures to deal with the pandemic, while compounding the misery and stoking the widespread anger against the political elite, served briefly to disperse the protest movement.

However, last August’s massive explosion at Beirut port that killed more than 200 people and caused about \$4.6 billion of damage to buildings and infrastructure, deepened the economic and political crisis. The disaster was the result of the criminal neglect and callous indifference displayed by successive governments and the ruling elite, which for years ignored repeated warnings about the dangers of storing ammonium nitrate without

proper safety controls near residential areas.

Diab resigned in the wake of the explosion as it became clear that his government would be forced to bear full responsibility. French President Emmanuel Macron sought to intervene and restore the direct rule of the plutocracy via a Hariri-led government in the service of imperialism, and limit or eradicate the influence of Hezbollah. The bourgeois-clerical party, which is backed by Iran, has played a key role in supporting the Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad against the Gulf monarchs, Turkey and Washington’s efforts to engineer regime change via their Islamist proxies, as part of the US’s broader campaign to overturn the Iranian government.

Months later, Hariri has still been unable to form a government in alliance with the fascistic Lebanese Forces led by former militia leader Samir Geagea, and the Druze-based Progressive Socialist Party of Walid Jumblatt, leaving Diab in a caretaker role.

Hariri is waiting to see whether the new administration in Washington will lift the Trump administration’s conditions that precluded any Hezbollah appointees in his coalition—thereby preventing him from forming a government—as part of President Joe Biden’s supposed desire to resume negotiations with Iran.

It is impossible for workers, whose demands for economic security and social equality are diametrically opposed to the interests of all factions of Lebanon’s kleptocracy, to resolve the crisis they face without a direct challenge to capitalism and its state apparatus. It needs an international perspective that focuses on building a political leadership to unify the working class across sectarian, ethnic, and national divisions—not just within Lebanon’s borders but throughout the region—in a struggle against capitalism and for socialism.



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