

Beirut Burns With Rage and Grief

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Citizens know that corruption and incompetence created this apocalyptic disaster.

“It felt like the end of the world.”

That’s what Beirutis keep saying as they reel from the impact of an apocalyptic blast.

The explosion turned the beating heart of Beirut into wreckage. Skeletons of buildings seemed the only things left standing in a city that became instantly unrecognisable.

More than 100 were confirmed dead by the next day, with more than 4,000 wounded and many still missing under the rubble. An estimated 250,000 people have lost their homes.

It was surreal. When the blaze began, people thought it unusual but not significant. Many Beirutis stood and filmed it on their phones, mesmerised by what appeared to be no more than a minor drama.

But this in itself caused vast numbers of casualties when the second explosion, which seemed nuclear in its power, tore through the city.

People watching the fire from their balconies were thrown several stories into the street. A friend of mine, six months pregnant, was torn into pieces as she sat in her living room, a kilometre away from the blast site. The blast was visible from the mountains 20km outside Beirut and felt as far away as Cyprus.

It was beyond imagination.

There was nowhere to take many of the injured, with one of the country's main medical centres, Hospital St Georges, forced to shut down having sustained severe damage in the explosion. Other hospitals were already stretched beyond their capacity.

"The situation is catastrophic," said Amani Shehab, an administrative official at the American University hospital. "We haven't witnessed anything like this before and we had to bring all our medical students to help stitch [wounds] and provide first aid to the hundreds of injured that we are receiving."

Amani said that the hospital already lacked first aid material, even basic antiseptics and dressings.

"In such [emergency] events we used to rely on the state hospitals to provide us with the necessary, but the [main state-run] Quarantine hospital was torn apart by the blast, as it's located immediately in the port less than 300 metres from the centre of the explosion," she added.

The Lebanese economy was already in freefall. The country had been under massive pressure from the Syrian war, with some two million refugees seeking sanctuary in Lebanon.

Then coronavirus and the subsequent lockdown hit, further crippling Lebanon's famous service industries. About 70 per cent of hotels, bars and restaurants closed.

The explosion tore through the heart of Beirut and the districts of Ashrafieh, Mar Mikhayel and Gemayze, the hub of night life, restaurants and bars that despite the economic crisis still provided a critical financial lifeline to thousands.

The devastated Beirut port was the country's main outlet to the rest of the world; experts say that it will take at least a year until it can function again.

The feeling in my city is one more of anger than sadness. We realise once more that the current political system cares little about the people it is supposed to represent. Instead it kills them.

According to all reports, the cause of the blast was nearly 3,000 tonnes of ammonium nitrate, an extremely explosive substance, that were confiscated in 2014 from a Russian ship and had been deposited at the port's warehouse 12. It was left unguarded and unprotected, badly stored, a lethal threat to the capital. All the time, the government remained silent.

Across the Lebanese media, journalists and bloggers ask how the authorities could have allowed such substances to be stored in such a central location. Confronted with government silence, civil society rages at what clearly seems yet another example of corruption, negligence and incompetence. It amounts to a massive violation of our human rights.

This catastrophe has again proved that the Lebanese have no leadership worth speaking of. Slow in responding to the crisis, all the government has done is announce there will be an official enquiry. There is no formal relief or reconstruction plan, beyond begging the international community to help them. It is clear that we cannot rely on official structures and instead must look to each other for help.

Beirutis, rich and poor, are mobilising to help the wounded and provide shelter for those left homeless and destitute. Restaurants and food shops are launching initiatives to support the volunteers and medical with free meals. People are setting up soup kitchens, rushing to give blood.

The explosion spread a vast mushroom cloud across our beloved city. But the chronic corruption, nepotism, negligence and incompetence of our ruling system, regardless of party or faction, casts a greater and more toxic pall.

I am Lebanese to the core. Beirut is my city. I was born here, brought up here. I was wounded in the civil war.

I thought we had finished with all the suffering. I thought it would all end. But it follows us like a curse.

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