

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

Date 15 September 2021 Index: MDE 18/4725/2021

JOINT LETTER TO THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL CALLING FOR AN INTERNATIONAL INVESTIGATIVE MISSION INTO THE BEIRUT BLAST

To the Permanent Representatives of Member and Observer States of the United Nations Human Rights Council,
Excellencies,

We, the undersigned Lebanese and international organizations, individuals, survivors, and families of the victims are writing once again to request your support for the adoption of a resolution by the Human Rights Council to establish an international, independent, and impartial investigative mission, such as a one-year fact-finding mission, into human rights violations related to the Beirut port explosion of August 4, 2020.

More than a year after the explosion in Beirut's port – one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history – that damaged over half the city and killed at least 218 people, including nationals of Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Philippines, Pakistan, Palestine, the Netherlands, Canada, Germany, France, Australia, and the United States, no one has been held accountable.

The explosion resulted from the igniting and detonation of tonnes of ammonium nitrate, which were stored alongside other flammable or explosive materials, in a poorly secured hangar in the middle of a busy commercial and residential area of the densely populated city. Human Rights Watch found that the evidence strongly suggests that a number of high-level military, security, and government officials foresaw the significant threat to life posed by the presence of the stockpile of ammonium nitrate at the port and tacitly accepted the risk of deaths occurring. Given the significant loss of life and threats to the right to life and health engendered by the destruction of much of the city as a result of the blast, the Lebanese government has an obligation, pursuant to article 6 of the ICCPR, to investigate the causes of the explosion and hold accountable those responsible.

In August 2020, the High Commissioner said that a swift international response was needed and supported victims' call for an impartial, independent, thorough and transparent investigation into the explosion. The UN Special Procedures' experts also issued a statement in August 2020 laying out benchmarks, based on international human rights standards, for a credible inquiry into the explosion, noting that it should be "protected from undue influence," "integrate a gender lens," "grant victims and their relatives effective access to the investigative process," and "be given a strong and broad mandate to effectively probe any systemic failures of the Lebanese authorities."

The government of Lebanon initiated an investigation into the Beirut blast, but the ensuing domestic investigation has been repeatedly obstructed and has failed in meeting the benchmarks, based on international standards, that were laid out by the UN Special Procedures. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Legal Action Worldwide, Legal Agenda, and the International Commission of Jurists have documented a range of procedural and systemic flaws in the domestic investigation that render it incapable of credibly delivering justice, including flagrant political interference, immunity for high-level political officials, and lack of respect for fair trial and due process standards.

In February 2021, a court removed from the case the judge appointed to lead the investigation after two former ministers whom he had charged filed a complaint against him to this effect. While Judge Tarek Bitar was appointed a day later, politicians and officials similarly started a campaign against him after he made a request to charge and summon for questioning senior political and security officials. State officials, including the caretaker Prime Minister Hassan Diab, have refused to appear for questioning, and the authorities have refused to lift immunity or allow for the prosecution of parliamentarians and senior security officials. Political leaders have attempted to cast doubt on Judge Bitar's impartiality, accusing him of being politicized. Further, on at least two occasions Lebanese security forces responded to relatives of the Beirut blast victims, who had peacefully mobilized against these obstructions, with violence. This violent response sends a chilling message about the authorities' unwillingness to grant the victims and their relatives' effective access to the investigative process and respect their right to be informed and to participate.

An international investigation would not impede, but rather assist the domestic process. The findings of an international investigation, conducted in accordance with the highest international standards and best practices, may be useful to the Lebanese authorities investigating the explosion and in any effort domestically to bring to justice anyone reasonably

suspected of criminal responsibility. Further, the investigation would make recommendations to Lebanon and the international community on steps that are needed both to remedy the violations and to ensure that these do not occur in the future.

It is now time for the Human Rights Council to step in, heeding the calls of the survivors, families of the victims, and the Lebanese people for accountability, the rule of law, and protection of human rights, and establish an investigative mission that would identify human rights violations arising from the Lebanese state's failure to protect the right to life, in particular whether there were:

- Failures in the obligation to protect the right to life that led to the explosion at Beirut's port on August 4, 2020, including failures to ensure the safe storage or removal of a large quantity of highly combustible and potentially explosive material;
- Failures in the investigation of the blast that would constitute a violation of the right to remedy pursuant to the rights to life.

The Beirut blast was a tragedy of historic proportions, arising from failure to protect the most basic of rights – the right to life – and its impact will be felt for far longer than it takes to physically rebuild the city. Establishing the truth of what happened on August 4, 2020 is a cornerstone to redress and rebuilding after the devastation of that day.

The thousands of individuals who have had their lives upended and the hundreds of thousands of individuals who have seen their capital city disfigured in a most irrevocable way deserve nothing less.

List of signatories:

Organizations:

Accountability Now

Activists for Human Rights Canada

ALEF for Human Rights

Alternative Syndicate of the Press

Amnesty International

Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND)

Arab Program for Human Rights Activists Egypt

Australian Lebanese Independent Forum (ALIF)

Baytna

Cairo Institute for Human Rights

Civil Rights Defenders

Gherbal Initiative

Gulf Center for Human Rights

Helem

Human Life Foundation for Development and Relief (Yemen)

Human Rights Research League

Human Rights Solidarity (HRS)

Human Rights Watch

International Center for Transitional Justice

International Commission of Jurists

International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)

Justice for Lebanon
Kulluna Irada
Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH)
Legal Action Worldwide (LAW)
Legal Agenda
MENA Rights Group
Mwatana for Human Rights
Our New Lebanon
PAX for Peace
Peace Track Initiative (Canada/Yemen)
Samir Kassir Foundation
Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)
Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP)
The Media Association for Peace (MAPS)
The Socio-Economic Justice Initiative – MAAN
Tunisian Human Rights League
UMAM Documentation & Research
World Lebanese Cultural Union

Individuals:

Antoine Charbel Tarabay, Maronite Bishop of Australia, New Zealand and Oceania
Christophe Abi Nassif, Lebanon Program Director, Middle East Institute
Dr. Najat Saliba, Professor of Analytical Chemistry and the Director of the Centre for Nature Conservation at the American University of Beirut
Dr. Nasser Saidi, President Nasser Saidi & Associates; Former Lebanese Minister of Economy & Industry
Randa Slim, Senior Fellow and Director of the Conflict Resolution and Track II Dialogues Program at the Middle East Institute
Zeina Zerbé, psychologist leading study on psychological impact of the Beirut Blast

Survivors and families of the victims:

Ahmad Mroueh
Antoine Kassab, lost his father
Antoinette Khouri
Arze Salloum
Bouchra Boustany
Carole Akiki
Carine Tohme
Carine Zaatar

Cecilia and Pierre Assouad
Charbel Moarbes
Cybele Asmar, lost her aunt Diane Dib
Degaule Bourjaily
Dolly Kanaan, mother of Cyril Kanaan
Elias Youssef Akiki, Nohad Maroun Akiki, Mary Elias Akiki, family of Joe Akiki
George Bazergy
Jacques Dib
Jean-Marc Matta
Jihad Nehme
Karine Mattar
Louisa Bechara
Lyna Comaty
Maher Achi
Mirna Habboush
Myrna Mezher Helou, lost her mother
Nada Akiki Abi Akl
Najwa Hayek
Nicolas and Vera Fayad
Nicolas Dahan
Noha and Youmna Hojeyban
Olga Kavran
Patrick Sacy & Carine Farran, and their children Luca, Noah and Alicia
Patricia Haddad, lost her mother
Pierre Gemayel
Rainier Jreissati
Reem bou Abdallah
Reina Sfeir
Rima Malek
Samir Asmar
Sara Jaafar
Tony Najm, lost his mother
Vicky Atallah, sister of Marine Elias Najem
Yvonne Kfourri
Zeina Sfeir
Ziad Richa
Zita Salameh

The August 4 Collective:

Andrea Arslanian

Anthony, Chadia, Ava and Uma Naoum

Charles Nehme, lost his father

Degaule Abourjeily

Christina Khater

Fouad Rahme, lost his father

Georges, Alexandre, and William Ibrahimchah, lost respectively their wife and mother Marion Hochar Ibrahimchah

Georges Zaarour, lost his brother

Jihane Dagher Hayek

Karine Makhlof, lost her mother

Khajak Papazian

Lara Sayegh

Laura Khouri Kfour

Layal Abdallah

Mireille and Bassam Khoury, parents of Elias Khoury

Nadine Khazen, lost her mother

Nazih and Cedric el Adm, family of Krsytel el Adm

Patrice Cannan, lost his brother

Paul Karam

Paul and Tracy Naggear, parents of Alexandra Naggear

Richard Jreissati

Rony Mecattaf

Sarah Copland and Craig Oehlers, parents of Isaac Oehlers

Tania Daou Alam, lost her husband

Tony Najm

Vartan Papazian, lost his daughter-in-law

Vicky Zwein

Families of the following firefighters:

Charbel Hitti

Charbel Karam

Eli Khouzamy

Joe bou Saab

Joe Noun

Misal Hawwa

Najib Hitti

Ralph Mellehy

Ramy Kaaky
Sahar Fares