



**Lebanon: “We are not safe here”:
Government fails people living in
buildings at risk of collapse in Tripoli**

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The cradle of a newborn hanging inside a house at risk in the Old Souk of Tripoli, on 3 April 2023 © Amnesty International

One year after the February 2023 earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, heavily felt in Lebanon, people in Tripoli continue to live in houses at risk of collapse, despite the state of emergency declared by the government in the aftermath of the earthquakes. They reached out to the local authorities asking for support, but they only received “eviction notices”.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 6 February 2023 earthquakes that ravaged large parts of Syria and Turkey were felt in Lebanon, with shockwaves reaching a magnitude of 6.3 on the Richter scale. The earthquakes deepened the cracks in the walls and columns of buildings already at risk of collapse even before the earthquakes, alarming residents across the country and putting their lives in danger.

The city of Tripoli in north Lebanon was particularly affected by the earthquakes given its proximity to the earthquakes' epicentre and the fact that it has the highest concentration of unsafe buildings in the country. Tripoli is also one of Lebanon's most marginalized cities and has the highest poverty rate in the country. During the 6 February earthquakes and their aftershocks, residents rushed out onto the streets – many spending several nights outside their homes – fearing the collapse of their already unsafe structures. On 18 September 2023, an uninhabited, three-storey historic building in Tripoli's al-Zehrieh neighbourhood collapsed, reigniting residents' fears.

Immediately after the earthquakes, the government said it would assess buildings for risk and seek to provide a 320USD "housing allowance" that would cover rent of alternative housing for three months for people who needed to relocate. A year later, 13 people that Amnesty International interviewed who are living in buildings classified as at risk of collapse in Tripoli told the organisation that all they received from the authorities were eviction notices. A woman who lives in a house at risk in the Old Souk of Tripoli told Amnesty International that, after her husband failed repeatedly in getting the authorities to help him fix their house, they lost hope: "Every winter, and during every storm, we put our hands on our hearts and pray that we don't die under the rubble of our house."

In 2022, the Tripoli Municipality conducted a survey and identified 236 buildings at risk in Tripoli alone, including 139 new buildings constructed using cement and 97 heritage buildings. By August 2023, Ahmad Qamareddine, the president of Tripoli's Municipal Council, told Amnesty International that they had identified 20-25 inhabited buildings on the verge of collapse and 800-1000 buildings at risk. He added that the Higher Relief Committee only agreed to provide the 320 USD promised by the government to the residents of the 20-25 buildings that were most at risk of collapse. All but one of the residents interviewed by Amnesty International said that they were unaware of this housing allowance but underscored that this sum was neither enough to cover the cost of rent for three months, nor was it enough to enable residents to repair their homes or find sustainable alternative housing.

In the context of an acute economic crisis where more than 75 percent of the population is living in poverty, the lack of social protection leaves residents unable to cope with shocks such as disasters and extreme weather events.

None of the people Amnesty International interviewed had the financial means to renovate or restore their homes to ensure their safety, nor to move to alternative, adequate housing that is safe for them and their families. As such, most of the people Amnesty International interviewed remain living in the buildings deemed at risk of collapse.

Despite acceding to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights in November 1972, Lebanon offers little in terms of enshrining the right to adequate housing or ensuring housing is affordable and accessible, including for people whose homes are damaged or destroyed by natural disasters. The key provision relevant to buildings at risk of collapse is Article 4 of the governmental Decree number 14923, issued in 2005 and amended in 2012. It provides that the owner of a building is responsible for renovating or demolishing buildings at risk of collapse. If the owner cannot afford repairs or demolition, the Article then charges the municipality with the cost of demolition, not renovation or repair.

In line with international human rights standards, the Lebanese authorities at all levels must ensure that all people can access adequate housing, including through the provision of financial support and subsidies and alternative housing where necessary. No one should be rendered homeless or vulnerable to other human rights violations as a result of the repair and reconstruction process.

Amnesty International calls on the Lebanese authorities to urgently conduct and complete a survey to assess the safety of buildings across the country. The outcome of the survey, including a detailed list of unsafe structures, must be publicly available and accessible to all. Structures deemed unsafe for habitation prior to the earthquakes must be included in these lists.

The authorities must engage in a process of genuine consultation with all affected people to devise plans for repairing/reconstructing damaged buildings.

The government must review the housing allowance amount to ensure that it is sufficient to allow people to access alternative adequate housing and must provide the necessary funds to protect the right to life of people living in endangered buildings, including through ensuring municipalities have the resources to fulfil their duties.

The authorities must also amend the Decree 14293 on the safety requirements of buildings to make it in line with international standards and people's right to life, especially in situations where tenants and owners do not have the means to repair the buildings at risk of collapse.

Finally, the authorities must draft a plan that engages with the international community in making housing safe and adequate for everyone in Lebanon, including those living in poverty and the most impoverished.

2. METHODOLOGY

Amnesty International researchers conducted research in Tripoli in April 2023. Researchers visited the neighbourhoods of El-Tal and Zehrieh, the Old Souk, Al-Qubbeh, and Dahr El-Maghar, where they observed the cracks and damage on several residential buildings and interviewed members of 10 families who live in buildings classified by the municipality of Tripoli as “at risk of collapse,”¹ three families who had left their unsafe homes and were living in precarious situations,² and a family whose child was killed after their home collapsed in June 2022.³

Amnesty International researchers conducted follow-up interviews with twelve families by phone in December 2023. The organization also interviewed in person the head of the Tripoli Municipal Council as well as the Secretary General of the Higher Relief Council (HRC). The HRC is a governmental body formed in 1976 tasked with receiving relief donations and distributing them to people in need.

Additionally, researchers interviewed three members of civil society organizations working on housing issues and reviewed statements made by the government in the aftermath of the earthquakes relevant to the housing situation.

The organization wrote to the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities on 27 March 2023 inquiring about the number of buildings at risk as well as the implementation status of the government's Municipal Emergency Plan announced after the earthquakes, including the outcome of the survey of buildings at risk across Lebanon, but had not received a response at the time of publication.

¹ Mohammed El-laali, Safwan Aachouch, Farid Abu-Lhaf, and Mahmoud Aacra, Issa Ahmad Rustum, and anonymous, interviews in person, 3 April 2023; Walid Abdulsalam Izzeddine Al-Ali, Amal Mohammad Al-Youssef, Riad Ahmad Al Moustafa, and Amina Khodr Taleb, interview by voice call, 12 May 2023

² Jamila Mousalli, Mohammed Samrouth, interview by voice call, 8 August 2023; Ezzeddine El-Masri, interview by voice call, 11 August 2023

³ Khaled Diko, interview by voice call, 3 May 2023

3. THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW: THE RIGHT TO ADEQUATE HOUSING

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which Lebanon ratified in 1972, guarantees the right to adequate housing.⁴ Other international human rights treaties that Lebanon has ratified also protect the right to housing, including prohibiting discrimination in housing⁵ and obliging states to provide material assistance and support programmes to families and children, particularly with regard to housing, in case of need.⁶

As a state party to the ICESCR, the government must also adopt appropriate legislative, administrative, budgetary, judicial, promotional and other measures to fully realize the right to adequate housing. It must prioritize the realization of minimum essential levels of housing for all people and prioritize the most disadvantaged groups in all programmes and while allocating resources. The ICESCR also requires the government to guarantee the right of people to participate in and be consulted over decisions that will affect their human rights, and to provide an effective remedy if any of these rights are violated.

In the case of evictions, guaranteeing the right to adequate housing includes an obligation on states to take all appropriate measures, to the maximum of its available resources, to ensure that adequate alternative housing, resettlement, or access to productive land is available.⁷ Before evictions are carried out, particularly those involving large groups, for example, residents of entire buildings or areas that have become unsafe, states should consult with affected people and explore all feasible alternatives, for example upgrading buildings and making them earthquake resistant.⁸ If relocation of people is the only viable option, then the authorities should prioritize moving people based on an assessment of the risks they face, taking timely action to prevent loss of life or injury. Such action must conform with international standards and due process requirements to ensure that the relocation does not result in forced eviction; while people may have to be moved swiftly for reasons of safety, this does not require, nor can it justify, leaving people homeless or living in inadequate housing, unable to earn a living, or exposed to other human rights violations.

Where states are unable to fulfil their human rights obligations, they have a duty to seek support through international cooperation and assistance.⁹

3.2 DOMESTIC LAWS OFFER LITTLE TO RESIDENTS IN UNSAFE BUILDINGS

Lebanon is a country prone to natural disasters and extreme weather events, including earthquakes, tsunamis, and forest fires, in addition to armed conflict.¹⁰

Lebanon does not have a national law to organize and manage responses to disasters.¹¹ At the executive level, Lebanon has a Disaster Risk Management Unit (DRM), a coordination committee headed by the Prime Minister and developed in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), tasked with organizing responses to disasters and spreading awareness across

⁴ United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 993, p. 3

⁵ ICERD, article 5 (1965)

⁶ UNCRC, article 27 (1989)

⁷ CESCR GC7, p. 16 (1997).

⁸ CESCR GC7, p. 13 (1997)

⁹ UN, Transitional Settlement and Reconstruction after Natural Disasters, 2008

[emergency.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/Strategies%20for%20transitional%20settlement%20and%20reconstruction%2C%20Shelter%20Centre%2C%20Geneva.pdf](https://www.emergency.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/Strategies%20for%20transitional%20settlement%20and%20reconstruction%2C%20Shelter%20Centre%2C%20Geneva.pdf)

¹⁰ UNDR, Lebanon disaster guide, 2011

undrr.org/publication/lebanon-disaster-guide

¹¹ Lebanese Parliament, اللجان الفرعية المنبثقة عن اللجان النيابية المشتركة تابعت درس ومناقشة اقتراح القانون الرامي الى انشاء هيئة ادارة الكوارث, 18 November 2013, lp.gov.lb/ContentRecordDetails?Id=13597

Lebanon.¹² However, as a World Bank report noted in 2014, the DRM policies and plans are “not supported by adequate budgets, and implementation is often dependent on donor support”.¹³ The report specifically noted Tripoli’s vulnerability to disasters and identified various challenges in responding to these hazards, including “the lack of implementation decrees for various codes, the lack of independent verification mechanisms for infrastructure projects, and the limited enforcement of building codes”.¹⁴

Despite acceding to the ICESCR in November 1972, Lebanon offers little in terms of enshrining the right to adequate housing or ensuring housing is affordable and accessible, including for people whose homes are damaged or destroyed by natural disasters. A government housing programme that provided subsidized loans for people with middle and lower income to buy houses, collapsed at the end of 2018 with the beginning of the economic crisis.¹⁵ The key provision relevant to buildings at risk of collapse is Article 4 of the governmental Decree number 14923, issued in 2005 and amended in 2012. Article 4 provides that the owner of a building is responsible for renovating or demolishing buildings at risk of collapse. If the owner cannot afford repairs or demolition, the Article then charges the municipality with the cost of demolition, not renovation or repair.¹⁶

Further, Lebanon’s social protection system is woefully inadequate and leaves the majority of the population entirely unprotected.¹⁷ In the context of an acute economic crisis where more than 75 percent of the population is living in poverty, the lack of social protection leaves residents unable to cope with shocks such as disasters and extreme weather events.

4. TRIPOLI IN FOCUS: THE AUTHORITIES ONLY PROVIDED EVICTION NOTICES

4.1 POVERTY AND MARGINALIZATION IN TRIPOLI

Tripoli, Lebanon’s second largest city, is “one of Lebanon’s most marginalized cities” and “marked by the highest poverty rate in the country.”¹⁸ In recent years, Tripoli has suffered from a lack of investment by the central government, “threatening the operation of critical infrastructure such as water and sanitation; electric energy and oil refineries; transportation; telecommunication; schools;

¹² Lebanon, Prime Ministry, معلومات عنا: وحدة إدارة الكوارث, 2023
drm.pcm.gov.lb/AboutUs/AboutUs

¹³ The World Bank, “Natural Disasters in the Middle East and North Africa: A Regional Overview”, January 2014
documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/211811468106752534/pdf/816580WP0REPLA0140same0box00PUBLICO.pdf

¹⁴ The World Bank, “Natural Disasters in the Middle East and North Africa: A Regional Overview”, January 2014
documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/211811468106752534/pdf/816580WP0REPLA0140same0box00PUBLICO.pdf

¹⁵ Lebanon, the Public Housing Corporation, لمحة تاريخية, 2024
pch.gov.lb/Ministry/Historical-Overview

¹⁶ Lebanon, Decree 14293 on Public Safety and Security Requirements and Conditions for Buildings, Installations, Elevators and for the Protection against Fires and Earthquakes, 2005 (amended in 2012), 77.42.251.205/Law.aspx?lawId=231554, Article 4, Section 4.

¹⁷ United Nations, “Lebanon: Building Forward Better Needs a Strengthened Social Protection System”, 9 January 2023
lebanon.un.org/en/214601-lebanon-building-forward-better-needs-strengthened-social-protection-system

¹⁸ UN-Habitat, “Tripoli, Lebanon’s most marginalised city, sees positive impact of basic services”, 22 September 2022
unhabitat.org/news/22-sep-2022/tripoli-lebanons-most-marginalised-city-sees-positive-impact-of-basic-services

and hospitals”.¹⁹The impoverishment of the population, coupled with the lack of public investment in the city’s infrastructure, have left many buildings decrepit and in urgent need of structural repairs, particularly the older buildings located in the city’s historic downtown. The President of Tripoli’s Municipal Council, Ahmad Qamareddine, told Amnesty International that the city has around 167 historic buildings which are home to hundreds of people. He explained: “They’re two to four storey buildings, most of the landlords are dead, leaving their ownership to several inheritors and sometimes in legal limbo. Residents of these buildings also inherited old rates of rent, dating to decades ago, rendering them symbolic [due to the currency’s depreciation]. Owners and residents are poor. Many of these buildings are cracked, mostly due to water ingress and illegal construction work”.²⁰

In addition to poor maintenance throughout the decades, most buildings do not respect the requirements and regulations for the protection of residential buildings from earthquakes and other disasters. The governmental decree of 2005 detailing these regulations in future constructions failed to impose a rehabilitation plan for buildings constructed before 2005, even though according to the Central Administration for Statistics, 84.4% of the residential buildings in Lebanon were constructed more than seven years before 2005.²¹

Further, many of the buildings constructed after 2005 are not structurally resistant to earthquakes or in compliance with safety regulations. Qamareddine explained to Amnesty International that many contractors paid bribes or used personal connections to evade safety requirements and lower the construction budget.²²

The vulnerability of Tripoli’s residents to disasters, such as the 6 February earthquakes, should have been evident to local and national authorities. In recent years, several homes collapsed or partially collapsed, causing at least five deaths in Tripoli alone.²³

For example, on 25 June 2022, a building in Tripoli’s Dahr El-Maghar neighborhood collapsed, claiming the life of 5-year-old Jumana Diko. “We were able to save my wife, we rescued her first. By the time we got to my daughter, she was dead”, said Khaled Diko, Jumana’s father, to Amnesty International.²⁴

¹⁹ The World Bank, “Natural Disasters in the Middle East and North Africa: A Regional Overview”, January 2014
documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/211811468106752534/pdf/816580WP0REPLA0140same0box00PUBLIC0.pdf

²⁰ Interview in person with Ahmad Qamareddine, the president of Tripoli’s municipal council, 3 April 2023

²¹ Public Works Studio, “مرسوم السلامة العامة: لا ضمان لسلامة السكان ولا وقف لتدهور البيئة العمرانية”, May 2023,
publicworksstudio.com/public-safety-decree-no-guarantee-for-peoples-safety-and-no-end-to-the-deterioration-of-the-urban-environment

²² Ahmad Qamareddine, the president of Tripoli’s municipal council, interview in person, 3 April 2023

²³ The Legal Agenda, “انهيار سقف مبنى “الغوال” في الميناء على “أحلام” ساكنيه”, 10 December 2019
legal-agenda.com/%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D9%82%D9%81-%D9%85%D8%A8%D9%86%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%88%D9%91%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89/

The National News Agency, “وفاة شقيقتين جراء انهيار شرفة مبنى في منطقة القبة – طرابلس”, 13 October 2022
nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/197772/nna-leb.gov.lb;

Annahar Newspaper, “مأساة طرابلسية أخرى... مقتل طفلة وسقوط جرحى بانهييار مبنى في منطقة ضهر المغر بطرابلس”, 26 June 2022

annahar.com/arabic/%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%84%D9%87/26062022024356334

²⁴ Khaled Diko, interview by voice call, 3 May 2023

The HRC offered Khaled Diko and his son a night in a local hotel and 30 million Liras (equivalent to 1,000 US dollars) to cover their rent for six months. Khaled told Amnesty International that he used the sum to cover their expenses and his wife's medication.²⁵

Following this building's collapse, the municipality demolished an adjacent building fearing that it too may collapse. According to Diko, "five families lived in that building, none received compensation, and all of them remain without a permanent address".²⁶ Amnesty International's researchers saw the rubble of both buildings, still in the location of the collapse, during a visit to Tripoli in April 2023.

Seven months before the Diko family's tragedy, in October 2021, sisters Sabah and Hayat El-Zohbi died after the balcony of their old family house collapsed while they were standing on it.²⁷

Qamareddine told Amnesty International: "After storms, I always wake up worried that a building may have collapsed. And the anxiety increased severely after the February earthquake, especially regarding buildings in the old city. Miraculously, none fell!"²⁸

4.2 GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: MANY PLANS, NO BUDGET

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes, the Higher Defence Council, an inter-ministerial body in charge of national defence policy headed by the President, convened the National Crisis and Disaster Response Operations Coordination Committee to coordinate an action plan and raise preparedness among state bodies. The Committee declared a "cross-governorate state of emergency" and tasked municipalities with conducting surveys of unsafe buildings and reporting back to the Ministry of Interior within 72 hours.²⁹ On 8 February, the caretaker Minister of Interior, Bassam Mawlawi, tasked the Higher Relief Council (HRC), a governmental body formed in 1976 responsible for receiving relief donations and distributing them to people in need, with preparing a detailed report on the damaged buildings and called on municipalities to inspect buildings and report on the results to the HRC and the Disaster Risk Management Unit.³⁰

On 27 February, the caretaker Prime Minister approved an HRC request to allocate a budget of 100 billion Lebanese Liras (around 1.06 million US dollars) to cover the cost of alternative housing for people living in houses at high risk of collapse. Each household would receive 30 million Lebanese Liras (around 320 US dollars) as a "housing allowance", expected to cover rent for three months, during which residents should either repair their houses or find a more sustainable solution, at their own expense.

On 13 April 2023, Major General Mohammad Kheir, the Secretary General of the HRC, told Amnesty International that "we've identified so far 500 units in need of "housing allowance" across Lebanon

²⁵ Khaled Diko, interview by voice call, 3 May 2023

²⁶ Khaled Diko, interview by voice call, 3 May 2023

²⁷ National News Agency, وفاة شقيقتين جراء انهيار شرفة مبنى في منطقة القبة - طرابلس, 13 October 2021
nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/197772/nna-leb.gov.lb

²⁸ Ahmad Qamareddine, the president of Tripoli's municipal council, interview in person, 3 April 2023

²⁹ El Nashra, "تفعيل خطة الإستجابة الوطنية للكوارث والأزمات من قبل رئاسة مجلس الوزراء لمواجهة خطر أية هزة أرضية محتملة", 9 February 2023

elnashra.com/news/show/1609533/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B1-%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%AA

³⁰ L'Orient Today, "Mawlawi calls for survey of damaged buildings and landslides", 8 February 2023
today.lorientjour.com/article/1327659/mawlawi-calls-for-survey-of-damaged-buildings-and-landslides.html

and they should receive it soon”.³¹ However, he said that the detailed survey report is moving slowly because municipalities and residents are not acting fast enough.”³²

Major General Kheir acknowledged that Tripoli had the highest concentration of buildings at risk of collapse: “There are 162 buildings at risk of collapse in Lebanon. Tripoli has most of them with 63 buildings at risk identified so far. In addition, there are 51 historical or heritage buildings in Tripoli, with a renovation cost amounting to 30 million US dollars.”³³

However, the actual number of buildings at risk is likely much higher. In 2022, the Tripoli Municipality conducted a survey and identified 236 buildings at risk in Tripoli alone, including 139 new buildings constructed using cement and 97 heritage buildings.³⁴ By August 2023, Ahmad Qamareddine, the president of Tripoli’s Municipal Council, told Amnesty International that they had identified 20-25 inhabited buildings on the verge of collapse and 800-1000 buildings at risk. He added that the HRC only accepted to provide the 320 USD promised by the government to the residents of the 20-25 buildings that were most at risk of collapse.³⁵ Residents told Amnesty International that the 320 USD “housing allowance” was neither enough to cover the cost of rent for three months, nor was it enough to enable residents to repair their homes or find sustainable alternative housing.³⁶

However, even the government’s woefully inadequate plan was not implemented. Major General Kheir and Qamareddine both told Amnesty International that their offices did not have the budget to implement the government’s plans and that the government did not provide them with additional money for the earthquake response.³⁷

On the national level, the head of the HRC told Amnesty International that “the budget of the HRC after the economic collapse barely covers the salaries of our 20 employees. We cannot secure the 320 US dollar housing allowance for families residing in homes at risk of collapse without international support.”³⁸

Qamareddine said that in May 2023, the Tripoli Municipality had just received from the government their allocation of the 2020 budget.³⁹ He added:

“Before 2019, Tripoli’s municipality received a budget of 75 billion Liras (around US50M dollars at the official rate) and used to act independently once a building is classified as at risk of collapse, without waiting for funding from the central government. We send warnings to the owners, ordering them to restore the buildings. If they cannot afford the cost, the municipality restores and owns the building, until the owners pay their debt. This budget has lost its value

³¹ Major General Mohammed Kheir, Interview in person, 13 April 2023

³² Major General Mohammed Kheir, Interview in person, 13 April 2023

³³ Major General Mohammed Kheir, Interview in person, 13 April 2023

³⁴ The Legal Agenda, الخوف يستوطن أزقة طرابلس: البلدية تتحدث عن 700 مبنى مهددًا والرقم النهائي أعلى بكثير, 18 February 2023

legal-agenda.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D9%88%D9%81-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86-%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9/

³⁵ Ahmad Qamareddine, the president of Tripoli’s municipal council, Interview in person, 3 April 2023

³⁶ Jamila Mousalli, Mohammed El-laali, Safwan Aachouch, Farid Abu-Lhaf, Mahmoud Aacra, Issa Ahmad Rustum, and anonymous, interviews in person, 3 April 2023; Walid Abdulsalam Izzeddine Al-Ali, Amal Mohammad Al-Youssef, Riad Ahmad Al Moustafa, and Amina Khodr Taleb, interview by voice call, 12 May 2023; Mohammed Samrouth, interview by voice call, 8 August 2023; Ezzedine El-Masri, interview by voice call, 11 August 2023

³⁷ Ahmad Qamareddine, Interview in person, 3 April 2023; Major General Mohammed Kheir, Interview in person, 13 April 2023

³⁸ Major General Mohammed Kheir, Interview in person, 13 April 2023

³⁹ Ahmad Qamareddine, the president of Tripoli’s municipal council, Interview in person, 3 April 2023

now and barely covers the salaries of our 550-650 employees, so we are forced to follow the central government's initiative".⁴⁰

Without sufficient budgets, neither the HRC nor the Tripoli Municipality were able to implement the government's plans, leaving residents in buildings at risk without even the meagre 320 USD temporary housing allowance.

4.3 WHAT HOUSING ALLOWANCE?

In April 2023, Amnesty International researchers visited four neighbourhoods in Tripoli and spoke to 13 residents of buildings at risk of collapse in order to assess the implementation of the authorities' plans and the impact of unsafe buildings on residents' rights to life and adequate housing. Amnesty International followed up with 12 of those residents in December 2023 to monitor progress on the authorities' plans.

12 out of 13 residents interviewed in April 2023 confirmed to the organization that no official representative inspected their buildings after the earthquakes nor did they receive any communication – in person, verbally, or in writing – from any official entity inquiring about their housing situation, which was only growing more dire in the winter months. In December 2023, 11 of the people interviewed in April told the organization that they did not receive a visit from any official representative in the eight months between April and December.⁴¹ The remaining person was unreachable in December.

Only one person interviewed by Amnesty International in April was aware of the housing allowance offered by the government. She said that she and her neighbours residing in the same building received a visit from the head of the Higher Relief Council in February 2023 informing them about the allowance available to them while they renovate their apartments at their own expense. She told Amnesty International that Major General Kheir promised that, if they apply then, they should receive the money in a period of six months. No one in her building applied for this allowance because it was insufficient to cover the cost of rent for three months and none of the residents could afford to repair their homes anyway.⁴²

12 out of the 13 residents that Amnesty International interviewed in April 2023 said that they are unable to afford repairing their homes and that when they sought municipal help before and after the earthquakes, they only received eviction notices from the municipal authority, which Amnesty International reviewed.⁴³ Only one resident interviewed by Amnesty International said he could afford to fix his home at his own expense, but the local authorities did not allow him to proceed because the

⁴⁰ Ahmad Qamareddine, the president of Tripoli's municipal council, Interview in person, 3 April 2023

⁴¹ Mohammed El-laali, Safwan Aachouch, Farid Abu-Lhaf, Mahmoud Aacra, Issa Ahmad Rustum, and anonymous, interviews in person, 3 April 2023; Walid Abdulsalam Izzeddine Al-Ali, Amal Mohammad Al-Youssef, Riad Ahmad Al Moustafa, and Amina Khodr Taleb, interview by voice call, 12 May 2023; Mohammed Samrouth, interview by voice call, 8 August 2023; Ezzeddine El-Masri, interview by voice call, 11 August 2023

⁴² Jamila Mousalli, interview in person, 3 April 2023

⁴³ Mohammed El-laali, Safwan Aachouch, Farid Abu-Lhaf, Mahmoud Aacra, Issa Ahmad Rustum, and anonymous, interviews in person, 3 April 2023; Walid Abdulsalam Izzeddine Al-Ali, Amal Mohammad Al-Youssef, Riad Ahmad Al Moustafa, and Amina Khodr Taleb, interview by voice call, 12 May 2023; Mohammed Samrouth, interview by voice call, 8 August 2023; Ezzeddine El-Masri, interview by voice call, 11 August 2023

three-floor building where he resides in Al-Qubbeh is classified as a heritage building.⁴⁴ The renovation of heritage buildings involves a different process detailed below.⁴⁵

The head of Tripoli municipality Ahmad Qamareddine said:

“There is no central short term or long-term plan to address the issue of buildings at risk. The reaction to earthquakes was spontaneous and all of our work currently remains spontaneous. As municipalities, we are unable to budget for salaries: we requested 100 billion Liras for salaries, but we spent them in seven months because of the exceptional pay increases in the public sector. The country is unstable and our plans are spontaneous. So yes, our work as municipality is currently limited to posting eviction notices on buildings at risk of collapse”.⁴⁶

JAMILA MOUSALLI

Jamila Mousalli was born and lives in a ten-storey building constructed in the 1970s, close to Al-Tal square in Tripoli, with her son, who works in a restaurant, and her sister, who suffers from a chronic illness in the nervous system. Jamila owns her home, having inherited it from her parents, and has lived there for the last 40 years.⁴⁷

She told Amnesty International that the building shook so violently when the earthquakes struck that residents ran down to the street and spent the night outside, along with hundreds of other people who feared their buildings’ collapse. The aftershocks in the weeks following the earthquakes continued to rock the building. She said that although the building committee tried to contact the municipality to request an assessment of the building’s structural integrity, the municipality did not respond to their request. A resident in the building contacted three independent engineers to examine the building, who all agreed that it must be vacated.⁴⁸

Jamila took her family to her brother’s house, but less than a week later, she returned:

“My brother is married and a father of six kids. It wasn’t a viable situation. Better for us to stay in our house even if it collapses on our heads.”⁴⁹

Five other families who had left in the aftermath of the earthquakes also returned to their homes.

After several visits to the municipality seeking support, the municipality merely posted an “eviction notice” on the building. The residents then contacted the Higher Relief Council for support. According to Jamila, Major General Mohammed Kheir himself visited the building, but in the meeting with residents did not allow them to speak or ask questions, and just announced that the HRC can provide them with 30 million Liras (320USD) to cover alternative housing for three months, while residents renovate the building at their expense. However, Jamila underscored that she could not afford the costs even if she sold everything in her house:

“I go to a local humanitarian organization to get my family’s daily meal. I sold everything in the house to survive. I still have a 30-year-old fridge and an even older washing machine. These are everything I have, and they won’t get me the US500 dollars for basic repairs. If God wants to take me, then be it.”⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Anonymous, interview in person, 3 April 2023

⁴⁵ UN-Habitat, Preserving historic Lebanese homes through heritage conservation and urban renewal, December 2020

unhabitat.org/news/03-dec-2020/preserving-historic-lebanese-homes-through-heritage-conservation-and-urban-renewal

⁴⁶ Ahmad Qamareddine, the president of Tripoli’s municipal council, Interview in person, 3 April 2023

⁴⁷ Jamila Mousalli, interview in person, 3 April 2023

⁴⁸ Jamila Mousalli, interview in person, 3 April 2023

⁴⁹ Jamila Mousalli, interview in person, 3 April 2023

⁵⁰ Jamila Mousalli, interview in person, 3 April 2023

Amnesty International's team examined the building: the steel bars were eroded and showing in most slabs from the outside as well as on the stairs. Cracks were apparent on the sides of the building, which allowed water to seep inside.

WALID ABDUSALAM IZZEDDINE AL-ALI

Walid Abdulsalam Izzeddine al-Ali has a disability which impacts his mobility and lives in a rented home in Dahr El-Maghar neighbourhood with seven family members, including his two children. His home is in a building that visibly leans to one side and was deemed at risk of collapse by the municipal authority even before the earthquakes. He told Amnesty International:

“During the earthquake, the house shook so strongly that I yelled at my kids to leave the house, but they refused to leave without me. We started praying together, we thought that we will die.”⁵¹

Walid said that he was paying rent at an old rate, meaning that the value was almost nominal. According to Walid, the owner of the house didn't have the means to renovate, and Walid said he cannot afford to pay higher rent. The residents of the building had already received an “eviction notice” from the municipality before the earthquakes, citing “metals rust and corrosion” and “falling concrete” among the risks endangering people's lives in and around the building.⁵²

After the earthquakes, they were not contacted by the municipality or the HRC. Walid said that no one checked in on the building's residents, examined the building or informed them about the housing allowance.⁵³

MOHAMMED EL-IAALI

Mohammed el-laali lives in an old two-story in the Old Souk of Tripoli with his family of eight. Mohammed bought the house 13 years ago and worked on restoring the two floors. He said that one of the building's foundational columns was severely cracked, endangering the whole building. Amnesty International's researchers witnessed the cracks. The municipality sent engineers to examine the house in November 2019, and they classified the building as at risk of collapse. However, instead of support, Mohammed received a fine and a warning from the municipality, stating that he will be held responsible for all the damage, including death, if his house collapsed:

“I was shocked. All this work and I get a warning? I launched another round of visits and favour-asking and begging, till a woman who works in the municipality felt sorry for me and pointed out the mistake to the relevant authorities. At that point, I was just thankful that they changed the warning to an eviction notice.”⁵⁴

Mohammed works as a guard in the technical school of Al-Qubbeh on a temporary contract. He said:

“I get a daily salary of 114 thousand Liras (equivalent of 1.2 US dollar). It's not enough to put food on the table! I cannot fix this wall and I cannot move from this house, even though I know that we are not safe here”.⁵⁵

His wife added:

“Every winter, and during every storm, we put our hands on our hearts and pray that we don't die under the rubble of our house.”⁵⁶

The damage worsened after the earthquakes, with the appearance of deep cracks along the walls extending from the ground floor to the second floor.

⁵¹ Walid Abdulsalam Izzeddine Al-Ali, interview by voice call, 12 May 2023

⁵² Walid Abdulsalam Izzeddine Al-Ali, Interview with by voice call, 12 May 2023

⁵³ Walid Abdulsalam Izzeddine Al-Ali, Interview with by voice call, 12 May 2023

⁵⁴ Mohammed El-laali, interview in person, 3 April 2023

⁵⁵ Mohammed El-laali, interview in person, 3 April 2023

⁵⁶ Wife of Mohammed El-laali, interview in person, 3 April 2023

During the earthquakes, the family initially fled to the streets. But after people started to fire bullets into the air out of panic, the family went back to the house. “We had the choice to die in our house under the rubble or on the street because of a stray bullet,” he said.

Mohammed tried relentlessly to get the authorities’ attention in Tripoli and in Beirut. He said:

“I saw the ground underneath us crack. So, I went again and knocked on all doors, I repeatedly visited the municipality, called their hotline, wrote to the heritage committee, met with the prime minister in his Tripoli house, requested support from the international organizations on project in the city, talked to all the rich and famous of Tripoli, ... and nothing.”⁵⁷

Mohammed said that no one from the municipality visited his home after the earthquakes, and he was not aware of the temporary housing allowance provided by the HRC.

SAFWAN AACHOUCH, FARID ABU-LHAF, AND MAHMOUD AACRA

Safwan Aachouch, Farid Abu-Lhaf, and Mahmoud Aacra, and their families are all neighbours in a four-story building in the Dahr El-Maghar neighborhood. The building, constructed 90 years ago, is located on the same street as the building that collapsed in 2022, killing a young girl.

All three families have lived in the building for several decades; one of them owns the house, which he inherited, and the two others are renting at the old rates. The building sustained damage during Lebanon’s armed conflict (1975-1990), which caused part of the building to collapse. After the end of the war in 1990, the residents called on the local authorities and the landlord to repair the damage. The landlord built a wall to hold up the collapsed part, and the building has not had any repairs since.⁵⁸

The three men told Amnesty International that, after the collapse of the Al-Nachar building in 2022, the municipality an engineer to examine the building, classified it as at risk of collapse, then handed out eviction notices to the residents without offering them alternative housing options or financial support.⁵⁹

During the February earthquakes, the three families initially left their homes but returned a few hours later due to their lack of other, safer options, despite being cognizant of the risks. “All cracks doubled in size”, said the three men.⁶⁰ Although they said they visited the municipality repeatedly, calling on them to repair their houses or find a solution for the building, they were met with indifference. They told Amnesty International that no one examined the building after the earthquakes nor informed them about the available temporary housing allowance.⁶¹

MOHAMMED SAMROUTH

Mohammed Samrouth lived with his family of five on the thirteenth floor of a building in the neighborhood of El-Nour square. He told Amnesty International that cracks on the walls were already visible before the earthquakes, but despite repeated requests for support from the municipality, nothing was done.⁶²

Mohammed described the horror his family experienced during the earthquakes, which he said prompted him to move his family to a house he owns in the village of Kefraya in the Beqaa

⁵⁷ Mohammed El-laali, interview in person, 3 April 2023

⁵⁸ Safwan Aachouch, Farid Abu-Lhaf, and Mahmoud Aacra, interviews in person, 3 April 2023

⁵⁹ Safwan Aachouch, Farid Abu-Lhaf, and Mahmoud Aacra, interviews in person, 3 April 2023

⁶⁰ Safwan Aachouch, Farid Abu-Lhaf, and Mahmoud Aacra, interviews in person, 3 April 2023

⁶¹ Safwan Aachouch, Farid Abu-Lhaf, and Mahmoud Aacra, interviews in person, 3 April 2023

⁶² Mohammed Samrouth, Interview by phone call, 8 August 2023

Governorate, which was also designated by the Kefraya municipality as at risk of collapse. He explained to Amnesty International:

“In February, the building shook so violently that we were not able to dismiss fear afterwards. We feared that in future earthquakes we won’t have the time or capacity to escape and that we’ll get buried under the rubble. We live on the 13th floor. We should not take the elevator during an earthquake. We traded this confirmed evil with another evil, less imposing, less confirmed”.⁶³

Mohammed said that he did some work on the ceiling and walls of the Kefraya house to make it safer: “But still, a normal human being won’t imagine a family living in the middle of all these cracks,” he said.⁶⁴

EZZEDINE EL-MASRI

Ezzedine el-Masri, an army soldier, lives on the fourth floor of a building in the El-Tal square neighbourhood with his family. He had bought the apartment 16 years ago through a government programme that provided subsidized loans for army soldiers.⁶⁵ The building is over 40 years old and has not been maintained. The municipality classified the building as at risk of collapse, and its residents were served with eviction notices, even before the earthquakes.⁶⁶

During the earthquakes, Ezzedine said that his house shook so violently that he decided to take his family and seek alternative housing. He stayed away from the house for months, changing houses, with rents varying between US100 dollars and US150 dollars. After five months of changing houses and unaffordable rent, he returned to the house he owns in July 2023 after taking on debt to do some basic repairs.⁶⁷ He told Amnesty International:

“I am an army soldier, and everyone knows how insignificant our salaries have become. If I didn’t have a child, I wouldn’t have left my house, despite all the cracks. My alternative housing solutions were very bad. Everyone we spoke to at the municipality said that they can’t help, the State is bankrupt. So, we decided to act independently: we collected US800 dollars from every apartment and commissioned the minimum works needed to secure basic safety. I am drowning in debt, but at least I know that I did the maximum I can for my child.”⁶⁸

Ezzedine applied for the USD 320 housing allowance from the HRC, but had not heard back at the time of publication. He said he is not optimistic about it, because many people in his community applied for it and none had received an answer from the HRC.⁶⁹

4.4 NOT ALLOWED TO RENOVATE: HERITAGE HOUSES

In 2022, the Tripoli Municipality conducted a survey and identified 97 heritage buildings at risk of collapse.⁷⁰ Since 2007, several government initiatives to rehabilitate and protect these heritage buildings failed to materialize, leaving the owners and inhabitants of these buildings in legal and

⁶³ Mohammed Samrouth, Interview by phone call, 8 August 2023

⁶⁴ Mohammed Samrouth, Interview by phone call, 8 August 2023

⁶⁵ Public Corporation for Housing, “لمحة تاريخية”, 2023

pch.gov.lb/Ministry/Historical-Overview

⁶⁶ Ezzedine El-Masri, interview by voice call, 11 August 2023

⁶⁷ Ezzedine El-Masri, interview by voice call, 11 August 2023

⁶⁸ Ezzedine El-Masri, interview by voice call, 11 August 2023

⁶⁹ Ezzedine El-Masri, interview by voice call, 11 August 2023

⁷⁰ The Legal Agenda, الخوف يستوطن أزقة طرابلس: البلدية تتحدث عن 700 مبنى مهددًا والرقم النهائي أعلى بكثير, 18 February 2023

legal-agenda.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D9%88%D9%81-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86-%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9/

bureaucratic limbo, unable to obtain the necessary permissions to renovate, even when they could afford to do so.⁷¹

Amnesty International interviewed a man, who requested to remain anonymous, about his struggle to repair his historic home in the Al-Qubbeh neighbourhood, which dates back to the Mamluk period, some 600 years ago. He lives in the house with his family of four. He said that the house needs restoration, but the municipality was blocking him from doing the necessary work.

He told Amnesty International:

“Municipal officers came promptly to stop me from putting a lock on an external door, to prevent access to our living room. After several trials, I managed to install the lock, without their permission. But I am totally forbidden from repairing the cracked walls.”⁷²

However, he told Amnesty International that the authorities allowed his neighbour, an older woman, who also lives in a historic building to do repairs. The man told Amnesty International:

“The relative of the old lady is well connected. He came with construction workers, and I sat and watched them build the structure. No one asked them to show plans and approvals or stop the work, over the several days of work. The workers used an area of one hundred square meter to dig properly for this structure, some of it located in my own property. But I didn’t protest the construction or report it to the authorities, because if their house collapses, it would fall on mine. By consolidating the old lady’s house, I was getting some protection for my house and family.”⁷³

The man described the fear he felt during the February earthquakes. He told Amnesty International that “we felt as if we’re having a collective seizure. Not only our house, but our bodies shook violently.” He did not contact the authorities for support after the earthquakes. He said: “I am done with the authorities, I knocked on all doors and saw that only people with connections can achieve their goals. I don’t want anything from the authorities; I am waiting only for an opportunity to leave the area.”⁷⁴

5. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

One year after the 6 February 2023 earthquakes, people continue to live in unsafe houses, especially in Tripoli, the city with the highest number of buildings at risk of collapse. The government’s post-earthquakes emergency plan did not materialize: the authorities have still not completed the survey of buildings at risk of collapse in Lebanon, and many residents living in buildings deemed to be at risk of collapse in Tripoli did not receive the government’s temporary housing allowance.

In line with international human rights standards, the Lebanese authorities at all levels must ensure that all people can access adequate housing, including through the provision of financial support and subsidies and alternative housing where necessary. No one should be rendered homeless or vulnerable to other human rights violations as a result of the repair and reconstruction process.

Amnesty International calls on the Lebanese authorities to urgently fulfil its international obligations and protect the right to safe and adequate housing, despite the economic crisis, particularly for buildings deemed to be at risk of collapse, in order to protect the right to life and the right to adequate housing of people living in them.

⁷¹ The Legal Agenda, الخوف يستوطن أزقة طرابلس: البلدية تتحدث عن 700 مبنى مهددًا والرقم النهائي أعلى بكثير, 18 February 2023

legal-agenda.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D9%88%D9%81-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86-%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9/

⁷² Anonymous, interview in person, 3 April 2023

⁷³ Anonymous, interview in person, 3 April 2023

⁷⁴ Anonymous, interview in person, 3 April 2023

To do so, the organization urges the Lebanese authorities to:

- To conduct and complete, as a matter of urgency, a survey to assess the safety of buildings across the country;
- The outcome of the survey including a detailed list of unsafe structures must be publicly available and accessible to all. Structures deemed unsafe for habitation prior to the earthquakes must be included in these lists;
- The authorities must engage in a process of genuine consultation with all affected people to devise plans for repairing/reconstructing damaged buildings. Ensure that the local authorities consult the residents and listen to their preferences, directly linked to their capacities and well-being;
- The process for repair and reconstruction must be in line with international human rights standards on housing and evictions;
- Inform all residents about their rights to the housing allowance provided by the government and make sure it reaches everyone eligible. The government must review the housing allowance amount to ensure that it is sufficient to allow people to access alternative adequate housing;
- Provide the necessary funds to protect the right to life of people living in endangered buildings, including through ensuring municipalities have the resources to fulfil their duties;
- Amend the Decree 14293 on the safety requirements of buildings to make it in line with international standards and people's right to life, especially in situations where tenants and owners do not have the means to repair the buildings at risk of collapse;
- Draft a plan that engages with the international community in making housing safe and adequate for everyone in Lebanon, including those living in poverty and the most impoverished. The government should reach out for international support and the international community should comply.

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Contact



info@amnesty.org



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amnesty.org



Amnesty International
Peter Benenson House
1 Easton Street
London WC1X 0DW, UK

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