

Lebanese Government Remains Paralysed by Political Deadlock

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The collapse on Sunday afternoon of four of the sixteen northern towers of Beirut port’s ruined grain silos has revived Lebanese fears and trauma over the explosion two years ago today that devastated the area and deepened frustration over the failure of successive governments to deal with either the causes of the blast or its aftermath.

On August 4, 2020, 2,750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate stored unsafely in a port warehouse detonated, causing a massive blast which killed 219 people, wounded 6,000 and damaged or destroyed the homes of 300,000 in three adjacent neighbourhoods.

The fall of the silos, the cloud of toxic dust this raised, and the threat posed by the rest of the gutted towers has provided the government with arguments to override popular objections to the demolition of the 50-year old, 48-meter-tall towers.

The collapse of the silos was caused by a fire which was ignited by hot weather in tonnes of fermenting grain which should not have remained after the explosion because of the risks it posed. The grain smouldered for two weeks at the base of the towers, caused them to lean, and filled the air with noxious fumes. Nearby householders were told to remain in-doors with windows and doors closed. The Lebanese Red Cross distributed KN95 face masks used against COVID to families in the area.

Firemen dispatched to deal with the situation found that water made the fire worse and foam did not smother it. Helicopters were barred from taking action as the rotors’ downdraft could bring down the silos which could fall at any time. Four did.

When the government headed by Najib Mikati decided in April that the silos had to be bulldozed and the area cleared, blast survivors, families of fatalities and Lebanese still shocked by the event rejected this plan. They argued that the silos should be shored up and preserved as a memorial to victims and as evidence to convict politicians of homicidal

neglect of the volatile material stored in a warehouse with other combustible material.

Residents of West Beirut, in particular, argued that the silos should stand because their presence protected their sector of the city by absorbing most of the blast wave which remained powerful enough to shatter windows in buildings at the southern edge this part of the capital.

A Lebanese friend visiting Cyprus said he wanted the blackened and blasted silos to be saved as an historical site to be visited by coming generations of Lebanese and, after decades, studied by scholars. It is unlikely, however, that the silos will survive unless serious efforts are made to preserve them at a time Lebanon has no money to do this.

The silos have become an icon and a tourist destination. Visitors to Beirut are routinely taken to the fenced-off port to see the blackened husks of the grain towers which had survived the blast, the largest non-nuclear explosion since World War II.

The freighter carrying the highly volatile material entered Beirut port in November 2013 with the aim of loading heavy machinery bound for Aqaba before continuing to Mozambique to deliver the main cargo. However, when the machinery was lifted onto the ship and placed on the hold coverit buckled, alerting port officials to the poor condition of the vessel, which was declared unseaworthy and detained. The Russian captain and three crew members were held on the ship as caretakers for a year until a court ruled they should go home. Before leaving, the captain warned that the ammonium nitrate was deteriorating and was a serious danger to the port. Bankruptcy prompted the operator to abandon the ship after it was seized for non-payment of \$100,000 in fees.

The cargo was shifted to an ill maintained warehouse where it remained until it exploded. The ship sank in 2018. Ownership of both the ship and its cargo has been disputed since the blast. Nothing was done by the Lebanese authorities for more than six years.

In December 2019, Port officials warned President Michel Aoun and Prime Minister Hassan Diab about the severe danger posed by the material but nothing was done until the beginning of August 2020 when Syrian welders were told by port officials to make repairs on the warehouse doors. It is suspected that sparks from their tools may have triggered the blast. They were killed along with firefighters who turned up to fight the fires ignited by the explosion.

Teams of Lebanese citizens responded to the blast by rescuing survivors from the ruins of their homes and offices and by clearing away debris. Hospitals struggled to care for the wounded and reassure their relatives. Lebanese formed groups to help families repair homes and civil society organisations provided food and medicine for the homeless. The state was largely absent.

An Armenian survivor told this correspondent she appealed two young volunteers passing on a motor bike to bring her injured niece down from her flat on the fifth floor of a damaged building. "Please, Ali, please Ali", the woman said she cried. Ali and his friend braved the broken and debris littered stairs, saved the young woman and commandeered a car to take herto hospital. The Armenian lady guided us to the blasted building which has been beautifully restored. "All this was done by local groups with foreign money." Nothing came from the government which was and remains paralysed to this very day by political deadlock and multiple economic and social crises.

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