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October 3, 2023

Lebanon: Investigate assault on Freedom March protesters

The Lebanese authorities must urgently investigate the violent premeditated assault during a freedom march on 30 September organized by more than 24 civil society organizations to protest the recent crackdown on personal and political freedoms in Lebanon, Amnesty International said today. The investigation must also include security forces' abject failure to protect protesters from the attack.

Video evidence and testimonies from three eyewitnesses indicate that members of the Internal Security Forces present on the scene failed to intervene to stop dozens of attackers on motorcycles throwing stones at protesters, shouting homophobic insults at them and physically assaulting them during scuffles lasting nearly an hour. At least two protesters were hospitalized for face and eye injuries.

“There must be an urgent investigation into the attack on protesters who were simply exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, including into the failure of security forces to protect them. The wholly inadequate response of the security

forces is all the more shocking given the violent assault waged against peaceful protesters,” said Heba Morayef, Amnesty International’s Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“A failure to investigate this incident would signal tolerance of the attack and embolden future perpetrators to attack others in relation to the expression of their perceived identity and beliefs. The Lebanese authorities and the Ministry of Interior have an obligation to ensure that peaceful demonstrators do not face intimidation, harassment or come under attack simply for demanding their rights.”

None of the aggressors have been arrested despite some of them bragging openly on social media about their actions and threatening civil society with further attacks should they organize future rallies in support of rights and freedoms for all.

The planned protest made no reference to LGBTI rights. However, in recent months, groups in Lebanon have described the use of “freedoms” and “rights” as LGBTI “propaganda”, urging the criminalization of any promotion of LGBTI rights in Lebanon.

Dozens of attackers had been waiting for the protesters when they arrived at the meeting point in downtown Beirut to start the march. Scuffles between protestors and the assailants lasted for an hour. The Internal Security Forces (ISF) unsuccessfully attempted to create a buffer between them but did nothing further to stop the attack.

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Heba Morayef, Amnesty International

Towards the end of the hour-long confrontation, the ISF hid a group of feminist activists and journalists in an ISF van for protection, but attackers continued to hit the van. The activists and journalists later managed to escape but should never have had to endure such an attack in the first place.

One video reviewed by Amnesty International shows three ISF members beating a protester who was urging them to stop the attackers.

In two other videos, ISF members can be seen harassing journalists verbally and physically and ordering them to stop filming the attacks.

In several videos, ISF members are seen making feeble attempts to separate the protesters and the attackers, mostly in vain.

Neither the Ministry of Interior nor the ISF has announced an investigation into these events. On 2 October, the Minister of Interior said that the protest had not been authorized and that the security forces, along with the military forces, “handled the situation as necessary”. However, lack of notification does not absolve the authorities from their obligation to protect participants in a protest.

Several protesters who were attacked and beaten told Amnesty International that they are considering filing complaints but are still contemplating the risks they may face. A lawyer supporting the protesters told the organization that people were “rightfully afraid”.

One protester who was severely beaten told Amnesty International that he would not file a complaint as he was afraid of being targeted since his photo was widely circulated on social media.

“I am worried that filing a complaint may provoke extremist groups, while we live in a failed state,” he said.

Rhetoric against freedoms on the rise

Since June 2022 and more fervently since July 2023, Lebanon’s political and religious leaders have intensified their campaign against the LGBTI community. In June 2022, the minister of interior banned all gatherings during Pride month saying it promoted “sexual perversion”.

More recently the head of a prominent political party has called for LGBTI people to be killed, the culture minister attempted to ban the movie “Barbie” on grounds that it “contradicted morals and values” and requested that the media use the term “sexual perversion” to describe homosexuality. The Ministry of Education also banned a boardgame in schools because it depicted a rainbow.

In August, Jnoud El-Rab, a far-right Christian group, attacked an LGBTI-friendly bar during a drag show, destroying furniture, beating people and threatening the owner with further violence if they continued to “promote homosexuality”. The bar owner told Amnesty

International that ISF members who arrived at the scene prevented the aggressors from entering the bar and helped some guests leave, but they did not stop the attack or arrest any of the assailants. No one has been held accountable for the incident.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Lebanon ratified in 1972, provides that everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression, assembly, and association, without discrimination.

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