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World Report 2021 - Lebanon

In 2020, Lebanon endured multiple crises, including a massive explosion in Beirut’s port, an economic collapse, rising political instability, and the Covid-19 global pandemic, all of which endangered residents’ basic rights. The Lebanese political class failed to adequately address any of these crises, some of which were of their own making.

The Lebanese Pound has lost 80 percent of its value since October 2019, eroding people’s ability to access basic goods, including food, shelter, and healthcare. The Covid-19 pandemic compounded poverty and economic hardship.

The economic crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic severely affected the medical sector, endangering the ability of hospitals to provide life-saving care. Electricity blackouts became widespread, lasting up to 22 hours per day in the summer.

On August 4, a massive blast in Beirut’s seaport devastated the city killing almost 200 people, injuring more than 6,000, and leaving 300,000 people without shelter. Prime Minister Hassan Diab’s government resigned shortly thereafter. Saad Hariri was nominated to be the country’s prime minister on October 22, nearly one year after he resigned from the post amid popular protests.

Lebanese security forces, including army personnel, internal security forces, and the parliament police, have used excessive force on several occasions against demonstrators, especially following the country’s October 17, 2019 uprising—often with impunity. Lebanese authorities continued to investigate and prosecute individuals for peaceful speech and refer civilians to military courts.

Women and children still face discrimination under the religion-based personal status laws, and child marriage and marital rape remain legal. Unlike men, Lebanese women cannot pass their citizenship to their children and foreign spouses.

There are approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon, of whom about 78 percent lack legal status, an increase from the previous year. The situation of migrant domestic workers, who are subject to the restrictive *kafala* (sponsorship) system and are excluded from labor law protections, has worsened amid the economic crisis and Covid-19 pandemic.

[IMG | SOURCE:
https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/styles/16x9_medium/public/media_2020/08/202008MENA_Lebanon_Explosion_h=6953ae75&itok=YA_xRZlu | ALT: Riot police with shields in front of Lebanese flag]

Beirut Port Explosion

On August 4, a huge explosion at the Beirut seaport [devastated the city](#). The explosion impacted Lebanon’s food supply, as Lebanon imports [85 percent of its food](#), and the port previously handled around 70 percent of the country’s imports. The explosion affected [163 public and private schools](#) and rendered [half of Beirut’s healthcare centers](#) nonfunctional.

President Michel Aoun and then-Prime Minister Hassan Diab said the explosion was caused by [2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate](#) that had been [stored in a warehouse](#) in the Beirut port for over six years without appropriate safety precautions. The circumstances that led to the detonation of the material are not yet clear. Media reports claimed that many high-level officials were aware of the existence of the ammonium nitrate but failed to act.

President Aoun has promised a transparent investigation into the causes of the explosion. However, [rights groups](#), including [Human Rights Watch](#), have raised serious concerns about the credibility and independence of the investigation. Human Rights Watch, other civil society organizations, and [victims groups](#) have called for an [international and independent investigation](#) into the blast.

Financial and Economic Crisis

Lebanon’s economy has long depended on a [regular in-flow of US dollars](#), and the Central Bank has pegged the Lebanese pound to the US dollar at an official exchange rate of 1,507.5 Lebanese pounds since 1997. Over the last 10 years, as economic growth slowed and remittances from the Lebanese diaspora have decreased, the quantity of dollars in circulation has [declined](#). An increasing lack of confidence in the stability of the Lebanese pound in 2019 and concerns about the stability of the banking sector led depositors to withdraw from dollar accounts, making dollars [increasingly scarce](#) and causing the unofficial exchange rate to hit [8,000 Lebanese pounds](#) in September.

In November 2019, months before the threat of Covid-19 became apparent, the World Bank predicted that the portion of Lebanon’s population below the poverty line would [rise from 30 to 50 percent in 2020](#). Some Lebanese economists estimate that this figure has [drastically increased](#).

As the Lebanese pound depreciates, the price of basic goods, most of which are imported, is rapidly increasing, eroding people’s ability to afford food, shelter, and healthcare. The Covid-19 pandemic [compounded the poverty and economic hardship](#) many faced, and disproportionately affected marginalized groups, including low-income families, people with disabilities, migrants, refugees, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ) people. The government [did not develop](#) a timely, robust, or coordinated plan to help.

The financial crisis has thrown Lebanon’s [healthcare sector into crisis](#). Hospitals are struggling to provide patients with urgent and necessary life-saving medical care due to the government’s failure to provide private and public hospitals with the funds it owes them. In addition, a dollar shortage has restricted the import of vital medical equipment and led banks to curtail credit lines. Medical supplies, including gloves and masks, [are scarce](#), compromising Lebanon’s ability to deal with the coronavirus pandemic.

In May, the Lebanese government began formal negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to discuss a [plan to rescue the economy](#) and request around US\$10 billion dollars in aid. However, the negotiations stalled when politicians failed to [agree](#) on the size of the country’s financial losses.

Freedom of Assembly and Expression

Anti-government protests, which began on October 17, 2019, against the political establishment’s corruption and incompetence, continued in 2020.

Security forces—including the army, anti-riot police, and parliamentary police—used excessive and at times lethal force against mostly peaceful protesters. The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) unjustifiably used excessive force against protesters in Tripoli on April 27, [killing one protester](#) and injuring scores more.

Tens of thousands of protesters gathered in downtown Beirut on August 8 to express their outrage over the Beirut blast and demand accountability. [Security forces](#) fired live ammunition, metal pellets, and kinetic impact projectiles such as rubber balls, including at health workers, and police deployed excessive quantities of tear gas, including at first aid stations. Several teargas cartridges were fired directly at protesters, striking some in the head and neck. Security forces also threw stones at protesters and beat them: 728 people were injured.

Attacks on free speech escalated in the wake of the October 17, 2019, nationwide protests, and authorities continued to use [Lebanon’s criminal defamation laws](#) to detain and charge individuals for speech critical of government officials, especially in relation to corruption allegations. Fourteen local and international organizations, including Human Rights Watch, announced on July 13 the formation of a [“Coalition to Defend Freedom of Expression”](#) to oppose the Lebanese authorities’ attempts to stifle free speech in the country.

Environment and Health

Despite the passage of a [solid waste management law](#) in 2018 banning the open burning of waste, municipalities [still engage in the practice](#), posing health risks to nearby residents, especially children and older persons.

The two major landfills servicing Beirut are set to [reach capacity](#) this year, but the government has not put in place a plan to tackle the looming trash crisis.

Since the 2015 trash crisis, during which garbage built up on the streets of Beirut, the government has been relying on [stopgap measures and temporary fixes](#) that do not solve Lebanon’s [underlying waste management problems](#), incurring huge environmental and public health costs.

Women’s Rights

Women [continue to face discrimination](#) under 15 distinct religion-based personal status laws. Discrimination includes inequality in access to divorce, child custody, and inheritance and property rights. Unlike men, Lebanese women also [cannot pass on their nationality](#) to foreign husbands and children.

Lebanon has no minimum age for marriage, and some religious courts allow girls younger than 15 to marry. In 2017, Lebanon’s parliament repealed article 522, which had allowed rapists to escape prosecution by marrying the victim, but left a loophole regarding offenses relating to sex with children aged 15-17 and sex with virgin girls with promises of marriage. Marital rape is still not criminalized.

Women’s rights groups [reported](#) a significant increase in the number of calls about domestic violence during Covid-19 lockdown restrictions compared to the previous year.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

LGBT people [participated prominently](#) in the nationwide protests that began on October 17, 2019. By taking their struggle to the streets, through chants, graffiti, and public discussions, LGBT people have moved demands of their rights from the margins to mainstream discourse.

However, article 534 of the penal code punishes “any sexual intercourse contrary to the order of nature” with up to one year in prison. Transgender women in Lebanon face [systemic violence and discrimination](#) in accessing basic services, including employment, health care, and housing. The economic crisis, compounded by Covid-19 lockdown measures, [disproportionately affected](#) LGBT people.

Education

[More than half](#) of school-age refugee children are out of school.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the transition to remote learning has exacerbated inequalities and increased the risk that some children, particularly the most vulnerable, will not come back once schools reopen. The government’s distance learning strategy was not implemented consistently in “second shift” classes, attended by Syrian children, leaving the majority [“completely out of learning,”](#) a group of international humanitarian organizations reported in June.

Children with disabilities are often [denied admission](#) to schools and for those who manage to enroll, most schools do not take reasonable steps to provide them with a quality education. Lebanon’s Covid-19 response has [overlooked children with disabilities](#), who cannot access remote education on an equal basis with others.

Migrant Workers

An estimated 250,000 migrant domestic workers, primarily from Ethiopia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, are excluded from Lebanon’s labor law protections, and their status in the country is regulated by the [restrictive kafala \(sponsorship\) system](#), which ties migrant workers’ legal residency to their employer.

Human Rights Watch and many other organizations have documented for years how the *kafala* system gives employers excessive control over workers’ lives, leading to an array of abuses, including non-payment of wages, forced confinement, excessive working hours, and verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. During the economic crisis, many employers [abandoned their workers](#), without pay or return flight tickets home, in front of consulates and embassies, and workers reported facing discrimination in receiving aid after the Beirut blast.

On September 4, the Labor Ministry [adopted a new standard unified contract](#) for migrant domestic workers that allows workers to terminate their contract without the consent of their employer, and provides key labor guarantees already afforded to other workers such as a 48-hour work week, a weekly rest day, overtime pay, sick pay, annual leave, and the national minimum wage, with some permissible deductions for housing and food. If implemented, the contract could improve the lives of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. However, the contract does not include provisions to allow workers to join and form unions, and the authorities have yet to roll out oversight and enforcement mechanisms or extend labor law protections to domestic workers.

Refugees

Nearly one million Syrian refugees are registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Lebanon. Lebanon’s residency policy for refugees makes it difficult for Syrians to maintain legal status, heightening risks of exploitation and abuse and restricting refugees’ access to work, education, and healthcare. [Seventy-eight percent of Syrians](#) in Lebanon now lack legal residency and risk detention and [deportation](#) for unlawful presence in the country.

At least 21 Lebanese municipalities introduced [discriminatory restrictions](#) on Syrian refugees that do not apply to Lebanese residents as part of their efforts to combat Covid-19.

According to the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee, there are approximately [174,000 Palestinian refugees](#) living in Lebanon, where they continue to face restrictions, including on their right to work and own property. In addition, approximately [30,000 Palestinians from Syria](#) have sought refuge in Lebanon.

Legacy of Past Conflicts and Wars

An estimated 17,000 Lebanese were kidnapped or “disappeared” during the 1975-1990 civil war. On November 12, 2018, parliament passed a [landmark law](#) creating an independent national commission to investigate the fate of the disappeared, and in June, the cabinet [approved the members of the commission](#).

In August, judges at the Special Tribunal for Lebanon [convicted a member of Hezbollah](#) for his role in the killing of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in a 2005 car bomb. The court acquitted the three other defendants in the case.

Key International Actors

Syria, Iran, and Saudi Arabia maintain a strong influence on Lebanese politics through local allies.

Tensions between Hezbollah and Israel remain high. The Israeli military said it thwarted a Hezbollah raid at the border on July 27, but Hezbollah denied carrying out an operation. Israel [violated Lebanese airspace](#) frequently.

Lebanon and Israel [began talks](#) over their disputed maritime border on October 14.

The international community has given Lebanon extensive, albeit insufficient, support to help it cope with the Syrian refugee crisis and to bolster security amid spillover violence.

Thirty-six countries pledged €253 million (around \$300 million) for emergency support to Lebanon after the explosion during a donor conference co-led by France and the United Nations on August 9. A second conference was planned for November. French President Emmanuel Macron is [pushing](#) Lebanese leaders to implement reforms.

Lebanese armed forces and police receive assistance from a range of international donors, including the United States, European Union, United Kingdom, France, and Saudi Arabia.

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