



United Nations Human Rights Council – 45th Session

Item 3: Interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on hazardous substances and wastes

Joint¹ Oral Intervention

21 September 2020

Speaker: Ms. Paola Daher

Madam President,

On August 4th, our city, Beirut, was destroyed when 2700 tons of ammonium nitrate exploded killing over 200 people and injuring over 6000. The blast destroyed the port, Beirut's lifeline, and surrounding neighborhoods. This explosion was senseless and completely avoidable. The tragedy we are witnessing today is the result of decades of governmental policies, corruption, greed, and deep disregard for human life. Special procedures have raised concern over the "level of irresponsibility and impunity surrounding human and environmental devastation on this scale," which is "unprecedented."

At the time of the blast, Lebanon was already grappling with a political crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic as well as an economy on the verge of collapse. The impacts of the explosion will be long-lasting and devastating: 300,000 people are now homeless with no public policy in sight to alleviate their suffering or give victims and survivors any type of reparations.

In the context of a global pandemic, Lebanon's health systems are partly destroyed and completely overwhelmed. Some of Beirut's major hospitals were destroyed in the blast and others are operating beyond their capacity. This will have dire consequences on the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls in Lebanon, including on maternal health and contraception and family planning information and services. Women's and girls' sexual and reproductive rights are likely to be deprioritized and overlooked, and the economic crisis compounded by the blast will increase barriers to SRH information, services and commodities. Moreover, persons facing intersectional discrimination are disproportionately affected by these compounding crises, including migrant domestic workers and refugees.

¹ NGOs in special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) joining this statement: Center for Reproductive Rights, International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND). NGOs without ECOSOC status: 11-11-11, Sexual Rights Initiative (SRI).

The government's response has been to double down on the impunity the ruling political elites have long enjoyed. Not only has the State not taken responsibility for the blast, but it has continued to violate the rights of the people living in Lebanon, including the right to health, to live free from torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, to housing and to equality and non-discrimination. Moreover, Lebanese security forces have used excessive force against protesters and human rights defenders demanding justice.

In his report, the Special Rapporteur called on states to “recognize their obligation to prevent exposure to hazardous substances [...] as part of their obligation to protect human rights,” and to adopt a rights based approach, focusing on mitigating the impact on human rights, “including rights to life, health, bodily integrity, among others.” The Lebanese government failed to ensure that the massive amount of ammonium nitrate that had been left at the Beirut port for six years was safely stored or disposed of and bears the responsibility for this tragedy.

There is a myth surrounding the Lebanese people: it is said that we are resilient, and that our city Beirut is like a Phoenix, always rising from the ashes.

Madam President, the people of Lebanon are tired beyond measure, and this time the ashes are too thick for us to rise above. We want justice, accountability, and the full respect and realization of our human rights.

While our organizations regret that the Human Rights Council did not heed the call of the Special Procedures during this session, we reiterate the need to create an independent investigative mechanism to address the ongoing deteriorating human rights situation in Lebanon and bring accountability to its people.

Thank you.