



Specter of university massacre looms over Thai student protest

## US evictions surge amid pandemic despite federal ban

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BEIRUT: People gather to release white balloons near the seaport of Beirut on Sunday to commemorate the second month after the Aug 4 massive explosion. (Inset) First-aid rescue worker at Beirut's fire brigade Afraa Obeid talks during an interview at the brigade's Karantina neighborhood headquarters on Sept 28, 2020. —AFP photos

# Lebanon emergency services reeling

## Woes of Beirut rescuers 'microcosm' of troubled country

**BEIRUT:** Fierce forest fires, a monster explosion that killed friends, then more Beirut blazes: Lebanon's emergency services are reeling from a devastating year, but are determined to press on. Lebanese firefighter Afraa Obeid, a 27-year-old woman with long black hair, recounted how she lost her close friend Sahar Fares in the August 4 Beirut port blast.

Sahar, Obeid's fellow female emergency worker, was among 10 colleagues killed when they rushed to the port to extinguish a blaze - and were then engulfed by the subsequent cataclysmic explosion. "It could have been me," Obeid said, sitting inside the gutted shell of the capital's main fire station. "I was there the next day to collect her remains. It was very hard."

The authorities had failed to tell the fire brigade of the giant shipment of fertilizer stored at the port. The port explosion, which killed more than 190 people and wounded thousands more, was only the latest blow in a year of tragedy for Lebanon and its fatigued firefighters. In the fall of 2019, ferocious forest fires ravaged huge areas

south of Beirut, putting many lives at risk. The fires, which fuelled public resentment towards a ruling elite seen as corrupt and incompetent, came days before a mass protest movement erupted in October to demand political overhaul.

**'Final blow'**

An ensuing economic crisis - the worst since Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war - meant inflation soared and the value of Lebanon's currency slumped. The purchasing power of the firefighters' pay packet evaporated. Then the outbreak of the novel coronavirus added to their woes, complicating rescues for the firefighters who must wear extra protective gear. The Aug 4 explosion dealt them a knockout punch.

"The Beirut fire department today is a microcosm of Lebanon," Obeid said, waving at the damaged wreck of the fire station, located near Beirut's port. Its windows were shattered by the blast, and exposed electric cables dangle from almost every corner. Firefighters must sleep in tents in the

building's courtyard. "The building is demolished," she said. "Just as are the people who work inside it."

Two months later, repairs are yet to begin, with no resources spare. "We have never seen a year like this one," said Lieutenant Ali Najem, a veteran firefighter working for nearly 25 years. The blast, he said, was a "final blow".

**'Martyr's project'**

Budget cuts and the explosion have left rescuers and firefighters with a diminishing fleet of vehicles and equipment. "Only 10 percent of our vehicles are operational today, down from 50 percent last October," said Najem. It makes tackling fires increasingly difficult and dangerous. There have been a string of major fires since the explosion. Just over a month after the blast, on Sept 10, a massive fire broke out at a warehouse storing oil and tires in Beirut's port.

The blaze took hours to extinguish, and sparked widespread alarm. The traumatized public hail the emergency services as heroes. At Beirut's Civil

Defense command center, rescue teams watch for the next disaster. For Lebanon's 5,000 civil defense volunteers, who don't receive compensation for their service, the situation is dire.

Many have lost their main jobs in the economic crisis, and are now struggling to make ends meet, director of operations Georges Abou Moussa said. "Like everyone else, we suffer," Moussa said. "It's very difficult psychologically. We head off to extinguish fires with preoccupied minds." Yet despite the dangers, "we are receiving a lot of volunteer applications," said Moussa.

For Ayman Al-Taher, a civil defense volunteer, the past few months were more traumatic than the 33-day war between Lebanon and Israel in 2006. "Even the July war didn't have that much of an impact on me, even though I saw death, body parts and a lot of destruction," the father of six said. For Taher, being a civil defense volunteer will always be a risky "martyr's project" - but he cannot retire. "Saving the lives of others will remain my priority," he said. —AFP

## Fears for civilians as fighting rages in Nagorno-Karabakh

**GORIS, Armenia:** Clashes between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces were raging yesterday over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region as fears grew for civilians after the two sides began shelling major cities. Separatist forces in Karabakh - an ethnic Armenian enclave that broke away from Azerbaijan in the 1990s - reported firefights along the frontline and the regional capital Stepanakert under heavy artillery fire.

Azerbaijan's defense ministry said Armenian forces were shelling several towns, including the country's second-largest city Ganja which was first hit on Sunday. Increasing artillery fire on urban areas has raised concerns of mass civilian casualties if the fierce fighting, which has already killed nearly 250 people, continues to escalate. The clashes broke out on Sept 27, re-igniting a decades-old conflict between the ex-Soviet neighbors over Karabakh and threatening to draw in regional powers like Russia and Turkey.

Neither side has shown any sign of backing down, ignoring international calls for a ceasefire and a return to long-stalled negotiations on the region. Stepanakert, a city of some 50,000 in the heart of the mountainous province, has been under steady artillery fire since Friday, with residents cramming in to underground shelters. The separatists' foreign ministry said yesterday that shelling of Stepanakert had resumed at 6:30 am (0230 GMT). It released video footage of repeated bursts of heavy shelling and of debris from seriously damaged blocks of flats, claiming Azerbaijan had used cluster munitions. Azerbaijan said Armenian forces were shelling Ganja and the towns of Beylagan, Barda and Terter. Hikmet Hajiyev, an adviser to President Ilham Aliyev, accused the Armenians of "attacking densely populated civilian areas". "Barbarism and vandalism. Sign of weakness and panic," he wrote on Twitter.

### 'Indiscriminate shelling'

The two sides have reported 245 deaths since the fighting erupted, including 43 civilians, but the real toll is expected to be much higher as both sides are claiming to have inflicted heavy military casualties. The separatist government has reported 202 deaths among its forces, while Azerbaijan has not released any figures on its military casualties. The International Committee of the Red Cross on Sunday condemned the reports of "indiscriminate shelling and other alleged unlawful attacks using explosive weaponry in cities, towns and other populated areas". Civilians huddled on Sunday in the basement of Stepanakert's stone-walled Holy Mother of God cathedral. AFP journalists saw, seeking refuge as explosions and air raid warnings sounded. Some residents were fleeing the city for Armenian territory, with many gathering in the border town of Goris hoping to find passage on to the capital Yerevan. Azerbaijan said Sunday that two civilians had been killed in shelling on the southern town of Beylagan, where a journalist working with AFP saw residents picking through the rubble of destroyed homes.

In a fiery address to the nation on Sunday, Aliyev set conditions for a halt to the fighting that would be near impossible for Armenia to accept. He said Armenian forces "must leave our territories, not in words but in deeds," provide a timetable for a full withdrawal, apologize to the Azerbaijani people and recognize the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. —AFP

## Egypt town fears worst for men lost en route to Europe

**DAHMASHA, Egypt:** Thousands of desperate migrants bound for Europe have perished in the Mediterranean Sea. In one impoverished Egyptian town, families fear that 15 of their sons are among the dead. The Nile delta cotton-growing town of Dahmasha already feels like a ghost town. Hundreds of its young men have embarked on the dangerous journey via war-torn Libya. Now a group of tearful, black-clad mothers and wives fear the worst after hearing reports, so far unconfirmed by authorities, that a rickety boat carrying their loved ones sank last month.

Crammed minibuses arranged by human traffickers had left the town northeast of Cairo for lawless Libya in mid-August, carrying 37 young men who had each paid 70,000 Egyptian pounds (\$3,775). About a month later, the International Organization for Migration reported that at least 20 migrants, mainly from Egypt and Morocco, had drowned when a boat capsized off Libya on Sept 14.

Two of the dead have since been returned to Dahmasha, and a short, undated video surfaced online over the weekend apparently showing 20 survivors. But there has been no word from the remaining 15. "I just want a one percent fighting chance... to hear something that will quench my thirst for knowing where my son is," one mother, Horreya Farrag, told AFP. She said she last heard from her 24-year-old son, Mohamed Farrag, hours before he boarded the boat on Sept 12 from the Libyan port of Zawiya, headed for the Italian island of Lampedusa.

### 'Dead before you get there'

Farrag, a house painter and the eldest of three sib-

lings, left behind a young wife and a two-month-old son in Dahmasha, a town of 18,000 people some 50 km northeast of Cairo. "He was the kindest of all of them," said his widowed mother. "I raised the three of them to be as close as a fist." The missing man's 23-year-old brother Karim said: "He had approached me about joining, but I told him: 'I'm not going. You're dead even before you get there. You're holding your own funeral shroud in your hands.'"

The families say they have received no information from Egyptian authorities. AFP also received no reply after reaching out to Egypt's emigration ministry. Egyptian MP Sahar Atman said she had enquired about the missing men with the Egyptian cabinet and foreign ministry. Last week, she said on Facebook that 20 of the men had survived and preparations were under way to return them to Egypt. In a video that circulated on Facebook on Saturday, which Dahmasha's residents shared widely, tired and haggard young men from the village listed the names of relatives who had perished on the trip. Some family members confirmed their identities but could not verify the claims as the apparent survivors still had not been in touch with them directly.

**'Feel our pain'**

The journey the men took became a terrifying ordeal long before they reached the shores of the Mediterranean, said the villagers. Rawya Abdalla, 38, recounted how her brother-in-law Ahmed frantically rang her from Libya, pleading for his family to send ransom money to traffickers who were holding him. "One day he called me, completely panicked, begging me to send him money so we can free him. He said they weren't feeding them or giving them water," Abdalla told AFP. "He was held hostage in a storage warehouse for 25 days and they also whipped them for what they deemed to be the smallest mistake, for talking to each other."

After selling the family car, they gave 20,000 pounds to the local smuggler who said he would pay



DAHMASHA, Egypt: Egyptian Rawya Abdalla shows a phone picture of her relatives, who are among 17 Egyptians who went missing in Libya while trying to get to Europe, during an interview in this village in Sharkia governorate on Sept 23, 2020. —AFP

the ransom. The claims echo a report by rights group Amnesty International last month that described how migrants in Libya were being "abducted by militias, armed groups and traffickers" and being "tortured or raped until their families pay ransoms".

Tens of thousands of migrants have made the perilous sea journey toward Europe in 2020 alone, according to the IOM, though Egyptians make up a relatively small contingent of those from Africa. Abdalla said locals are still desperate for information from President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi's government, and for help in addressing the hardship faced by them and many of the country's over 100 million people.

"We're asking the president to feel our pain," she said in the small town, where many fields are parched because irrigation channels have run dry. "What should our youths do? Kill or steal to survive? They are migrating to bring back some money legitimately. 'We've lost our sons and our money,' she said. 'We've lost everything. We have nothing. We want their corpses so we can bury them here.' —AFP