

Joint Letter to the Human Rights Council calling for an International Investigative Mission into the Beirut Blast

September 15, 2021

To the Permanent Representatives of Member and Observer States of the United Nations Human Rights Council,

Excellencies,

We, the undersigned Lebanese and international organizations, individuals, survivors, and families of the victims are writing [once again](#) to request your support for the adoption of a resolution by the Human Rights Council to establish an international, independent, and impartial investigative mission, such as a one-year fact-finding mission, into human rights violations related to the Beirut port explosion of August 4, 2020.

More than a year after the explosion in Beirut's port – one of [the largest non-nuclear explosions](#) in history – that damaged over half the city and killed at least 218 people, including nationals of Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Philippines, Pakistan, Palestine, the Netherlands, Canada, Germany, France, Australia, and the United States, no one has been held accountable.

The explosion resulted from the igniting and [detonation of tonnes of ammonium nitrate](#), which were stored alongside other flammable or explosive materials, in a poorly secured hangar in the middle of a busy commercial and residential area of the densely populated city. [Human Rights Watch found that](#) the evidence strongly suggests that a number of high-level military, security, and government officials foresaw the significant threat to life posed by the presence of the stockpile of ammonium nitrate at the port and tacitly accepted the risk of deaths occurring. Given the significant loss of life and threats to the right to life and health engendered by the destruction of much of the city as a result of the blast, the Lebanese government has an obligation, pursuant to article 6 of the ICCPR, to investigate the causes of the explosion and hold accountable those responsible.

In August 2020, the [High Commissioner said](#) that a swift international response was needed and supported victims' call for an impartial, independent, thorough and transparent investigation into the explosion. The UN Special Procedures' experts also issued a [statement](#) in August 2020 laying out [benchmarks](#), based on international human rights standards, for a credible inquiry into the explosion, noting that it should be “protected from undue influence,” “integrate a gender lens,” “grant victims and their relatives effective access to the investigative process,” and “be given a strong and broad mandate to effectively probe any systemic failures of the Lebanese authorities.” The government of Lebanon initiated an investigation into the Beirut blast, but the ensuing domestic investigation has been repeatedly obstructed and has failed in meeting the benchmarks, based on international standards, that were laid out by the UN Special Procedures. [Human Rights](#)

[Watch](#), [Amnesty International](#), [Legal Action Worldwide](#), [Legal Agenda](#), and the [International Commission of Jurists](#) have documented a range of procedural and systemic flaws in the domestic investigation that render it incapable of credibly delivering justice, including flagrant political interference, [immunity](#) for high-level political officials, and lack of respect for fair trial and due process standards.

In February 2021, a court [removed from the case](#) the judge appointed to lead the investigation after two former ministers whom he had charged filed a complaint against him to this effect. While Judge Tarek Bitar was appointed a day later, politicians and officials similarly started a campaign against him after he made a [request to charge and summon](#) for questioning senior political and security officials. State officials, including the caretaker Prime Minister [Hassan Diab](#), have refused to appear for questioning, and the authorities have refused to lift immunity or allow for the prosecution of [parliamentarians](#) and [senior security officials](#). Political leaders have attempted to [cast doubt](#) on Judge Bitar's impartiality, accusing him of being [politicized](#). Further, on at least [two occasions](#) Lebanese security forces responded to relatives of the Beirut blast victims, who had peacefully mobilized against these obstructions, with violence. This violent response sends a chilling message about the authorities' unwillingness to grant the victims and their relatives' effective access to the investigative process and respect their right to be informed and to participate.

An international investigation would not impede, but rather assist the domestic process. The findings of an international investigation, conducted in accordance with the highest international standards and best practices, may be useful to the Lebanese authorities investigating the explosion and in any effort domestically to bring to justice anyone reasonably suspected of criminal responsibility. Further, the investigation would make recommendations to Lebanon and the international community on steps that are needed both to remedy the violations and to ensure that these do not occur in the future.

It is now time for the Human Rights Council to step in, heeding the calls of the survivors, families of the victims, and the Lebanese people for accountability, the rule of law, and protection of human rights, and establish an investigative mission that would identify human rights violations arising from the Lebanese state's failure to protect the right to life, in particular whether there were:

- Failures in the obligation to protect the right to life that led to the explosion at Beirut's port on August 4, 2020, including failures to ensure the safe storage or removal of a large quantity of highly combustible and potentially explosive material;
- Failures in the investigation of the blast that would constitute a violation of the right to remedy pursuant to the rights to life.

The Beirut blast was a tragedy of historic proportions, arising from failure to protect the most basic of rights – the right to life – and its impact will be felt for far longer than it takes to physically rebuild the city. Establishing the truth of what happened on August 4, 2020 is a cornerstone to redress and rebuilding after the devastation of that day.

The thousands of individuals who have had their lives upended and the hundreds of thousands of individuals who have seen their capital city disfigured in a most irrevocable way deserve nothing less.

List of signatories:

Organizations:

Accountability Now; Activists for Human Rights Canada; ALEF for Human Rights; Alternative Syndicate of the Press; Amnesty International; Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND) Arab Program for Human Rights Activists Egypt; Australian Lebanese Independent Forum (ALIF); Baytna; Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies; Civil Rights Defenders; Gherbal Initiative; Gulf Center for Human Rights; Helem; Human Life Foundation for Development and Relief (Yemen); Human Rights Research League; Human Rights Solidarity (HRS); Human Rights Watch; International Center for Transitional Justice; International Commission of Jurists; International Service for Human Rights (ISHR); Justice for Lebanon; Kulluna Irada; Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH); Legal Action Worldwide (LAW); Legal Agenda; MENA Rights Group; Mwatana for Human Rights; Our New Lebanon; PAX for Peace; Peace Track Initiative (Canada/Yemen); Samir Kassir Foundation; Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM); Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP); The Media Association for Peace (MAPS)

The Socio-Economic Justice Initiative - MAAN; Tunisian Human Rights League; UMAM Documentation & Research; World Lebanese Cultural Union

Individuals:

Antoine Charbel Tarabay, Maronite Bishop of Australia, New Zealand and Oceania

Christophe Abi Nassif, Lebanon Program Director, Middle East Institute

Dr. Najat Saliba, Professor of Analytical Chemistry and the Director of the Centre for Nature Conservation at the American University of Beirut

Dr. Nasser Saidi, President Nasser Saidi & Associates; Former Lebanese Minister of Economy & Industry

Randa Slim, Senior Fellow and Director of the Conflict Resolution and Track II Dialogues Program at the Middle East Institute

Zeina Zerbé, psychologist leading study on psychological impact of the Beirut Blast

Survivors and families of the victims:

Ahmad Mroueh; Andrea Arslanian; Anthony, Chadia, Ava and Uma Naoum; Antoine Kassab, lost his father; Antoinette Khouri; Arze Salloum; Bouchra Boustany; Carine Tohme; Carine Zaatar Carole Akiki; Cecilia and Pierre Assouad; Charbel Moarbes; Charles Nehme, lost his father Christina Khater; Cybele Asmar, lost her aunt Diane Dib; Degaule Bourjaily; Dolly Kanaan, mother of Cyril Kanaan; Elias Youssef Akiki, Nohad Maroun Akiki, Mary Elias Akiki, family of Joe Akiki Fouad Rahme, lost his father; George Bazergy; Georges Zaarour, lost his brother; Georges, Alexandre, and William Ibrahimchah, lost respectively their wife and mother Marion Hochar Ibrahimchah; Jacques Dib; Jean-Marc Matta; Jihad Nehme; Jihane Dagher Hayek; Karine Makhoulouf, lost her mother; Karine Mattar; Khajak Papazian; Lara Sayegh; Laura Khouri Kfourri Layal Abdallah; Louisa Bechara; Lyna Comaty; Maher Achi; Mireille and Bassam Khoury, parents of Elias Khoury; Mirna Habboush; Myrna Mezher Helou, lost her mother; Nada Akiki Abi Akl Nadine Khazen, lost her mother; Najwa Hayek; Nazih and Cedric el Adm, family of Krsytel el Adm; Nicolas and Vera Fayad; Nicolas Dahan; Noha and Youmna Hojeyban; Olga Kavran Patrice Cannan, lost his brother; Patricia Haddad, lost her mother; Patrick Sacy & Carine Farran, and their children Luca, Noah and Alicia; Paul and Tracy Naggear, parents of Alexandra Naggear Paul Karam; Pierre Gemayel; Rainier Jreissati; Reem bou Abdallah; Reina Sfeir; Richard Jreissati

Rima Malek; Rony Mecattaf; Samir Asmar; Sara Jaafar; Sarah Copland and Craig Oehlers, parents of Isaac Oehlers; Tania Daou Alam, lost her husband; Tony Najm, lost his mother; Vartan Papazian, lost his daughter-in-law; Vicky Atallah, sister of Marine Elias Najem; Vicky Zwein; Yvonne Kfour; Zeina Sfeir; Ziad Richa; Zita Salameh

Families of the following firefighters:

Charbel Hitti

Charbel Karam

Eli Khouzamy

Joe bou Saab

Joe Noun

Misal Hawwa

Najib Hitti

Ralph Mellehy

Ramy Kaaky

Sahar Fares