



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda items 2 and 3

**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner  
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the  
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

**Joint written statement\* submitted by the International  
Organization for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial  
Discrimination (EAFORD), Association Ma'onah for Human  
Rights and Immigration, International-Lawyers.Org, United  
Towns Agency for North-South Cooperation, non-  
governmental organizations in special consultative status,  
International Educational Development, Inc., World Peace  
Council, non-governmental organizations on the roster**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is  
circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[26 May 2020]

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\* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



## **Environmental degradation, growing economic hardship, corruption and sectarianism continue to fuel Lebanon's Protests**

### **Introduction**

The Republic of Lebanon's substantial environmental problem concerning pollution and environmental decline has made a startling reappearance in the midst of the COVID-19 public health emergency. The state of environmental degradation and rubbish crisis, which has been an ongoing issue, violates several human rights including the right to life and health. The unfortunate phenomena of sectarianism, corruption, and cronyism are central to this crisis. Management of waste continues to be a major "money-maker" and, consequently, much of the financial investment aimed at solving the problem is misappropriated by the local politicians and their associates. The COVID-19 health emergency has made Lebanon's controversial laissez-faire approach to rubbish disposal considerably more acute and life-threatening.

### **Protests**

Lebanon has been experiencing anti-government mass protests since October 2019. These cross-sectarian protests were aimed at Lebanon's entire elite class, blaming them for cronyism, corruption, and misappropriation of public funds. This resulted in the fall of the government under PM Saad Hariri. After a long political deadlock, a new government of "technocrats" was appointed by the new Prime Minister, Hassan Diab. However, to the dismay of many, the Ministers are a mix of professionals and former political advisers, but many are linked to some coalitions with foreign influence. This is certainly not the type of government demanded by the protestors.

As the COVID-19 curve flattened, protestors re-emerged. On 27 April 2020, a new wave of protests erupted in Tripoli, gradually spreading to different cities across Lebanon. The protests eventually became violent as protestors set banks on fire, smashed facades, threw Molotov cocktails, and clashed with security forces. The government forces responded with violence, using live and rubber bullets against the demonstrators. Consequently, one man died amongst the violence of these protests.

Many of the protestors' demands remain: the end of a power-sharing system and the creation of an independent, non-sectarian cabinet. This involves greater environmental management such as clean running water, electricity supplies, and rubbish collection. More alarmingly, after the beginning of the COVID-19 public health emergency and the latest crash of the Lebanese lira, the protestors' demands included basic needs such as the right to food, health, and shelter.

### **Corruption**

Closely tied to the system of sectarian quotas, the problem of systematic corruption still presents itself as a major obstacle in Lebanon. The system created after the end of the Lebanese Civil War was intended to balance religious interests in order to foster a more inclusive form of governance and address the needs of this multi-religious Mediterranean nation. However, over time, this sectarian-based system has allowed for the governing elites to remain in power for years without the proper skills and expertise needed for effective state management.

The current crisis is often seen as the worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 Civil War. The decades of corruption and bad governance have resulted in the inevitable. In just the two months since the COVID-19 lockdown, the situation escalated even further. The Lebanese lira has lost over 60 percent of its value in recent weeks which has caused people to lose the value of their savings and salaries. The new government has approached the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for help; however, it has become clear through the ongoing

negotiations that in order to receive the requested IMF package, the country will have to make necessary changes in terms of their current corruption and waste management.

### **The COVID-19 Public Health Emergency**

Lebanon, like the majority of other countries, imposed movement restrictions on its population during the COVID-19 pandemic. The government attempted to help the cash-strapped population during the lockdown by implementing various tax measures such as suspending tax deadlines and deferring social security contribution payments. In addition, the Lebanese government introduced limited exemption for two months of custom duties and promised that public sector workers would continue to receive their salaries. No policy changes have been introduced for the private sector as of yet.

Despite the aiding measures laid out by the government, the country's leaders have received much criticism for their incompetent handling of the crisis. The distribution of aid has been delayed on several occasions – due to sectarian bickering – causing a major backlash from the country's growing number of impoverished people who have stopped caring about the COVID-19 pandemic. The most significant concern seems to be necessities such as food and medicines. According to the World Bank's prediction, 45 percent of Lebanese people will fall below the poverty line in 2020. Moreover, according to the Social Affairs Minister, the number could be much higher, projecting that up to 75 percent of people may be in need of some sort of government aid in 2020. The slow response of authorities has driven many back on the streets, protesting, despite the pandemic and lockdown. Many people lack the means to feed themselves and their families as hunger and malnutrition is becoming a greater reality for many.

### **Ongoing Pollution Problems**

As expected, the deteriorating waste crisis and environmental degradation has only become worse amid the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not always clear how well COVID-19 infected material is disposed of in medical establishments. Many disposable gloves and masks can be found in piles of rubbish on the streets. Certain types of hospital waste, such as food, end up in the bins allocated by municipalities. Other types of hospital waste are classified as hazardous and are collected by various NGOs who sterilize the materials before disposing of them. Nevertheless, it has been recognized by former Public Health Minister, Wael Abou Faour, that some medical establishments and hospitals do not abide by the environmental and health conditions as laid out by the authorities. As a result, it is the people of Lebanon who have to bear the health consequences of the government's mismanagement.

Due to the increased waste since the start of the pandemic, the open-air landfill in Beirut was closed on April 30<sup>th</sup> upon reaching its capacity. Yet, garbage continues to flow onto the streets of the city. Responding to the overflow, the authorities decided to approve the expansion of the site by a height of 1.5 meters. People living in the proximity of these sites are denied their right to health, therefore suffering from respiratory, dermatological, and gastrointestinal diseases. It is important to remember that these ongoing issues are deeply connected to the underlying issues in Lebanon: corruption, sectarianism, and cronyism. Waste management still remains a profitable business in Lebanon. The multi-million dollar contracts for Beirut's main landfills remain under the control of businessmen who are allies of some of the country's most elite politicians.

### **Recommendations**

We are deeply concerned about the corruption, cronyism, and environmental degradation in Lebanon, and we urgently recommend to the Human Rights Council the following:

- Support the people's call for an end to the sectarian power-sharing system and replace it with one based on democratic values;

- Investigate and punish individuals responsible for acts of corruption and ensure that stolen assets are recovered;
- Call on the government of Lebanon to establish a body of independent experts to monitor waste management systems;
- The government should ensure that waste management contracts are awarded to reputable companies without links to members of the government;
- The government should fully cooperate with international mechanisms and organizations that provide technical expertise to resolve the country's political and environmental crisis.

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Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ), The Arab Lawyers Association-UK, Human Rights Defenders (HRD), The Brussels Tribunal, The Iraqi Commission for Human Rights (ICHR), Association of Humanitarian Lawyers (AHL), Association of Human Rights Defenders in Iraq (AHRD), General Federation of Iraqi Women (GFIW), Organization for Justice & Democracy in Iraq (OJDI), The Iraqi Centre for Human Rights, NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.