News



A man and woman run from the site of an explosion in Beirut Aug. 4, 2020. Two massive explosions ripped through the Lebanese capital, killing and injuring many people and blowing out windows in buildings the city's port region. (CNS photo/Reuters/Mohamed Azakir)

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Hospitals in the Lebanese capital are overwhelmed with those suffering injuries from a massive explosion in Beirut's port, causing widespread damage the city and rocking the tiny Mediterranean nation already devastated by the coronavirus and its worst financial crisis since the 1975–1990 civil war.

"People won't be able to rebuild their homes, businesses, livelihoods. There are reports of hospitals turning away patients because they don't have the capacity," said Aya Majzoub, Lebanon researcher with Human Rights Watch.

"Even before this blast, there have been shortages of medical equipment, protective gear. The health care capacity was already overstretched. I don't know how hospitals are going to be able to handle these additional injuries," she added. Initial reports say the explosion was caused by a large amount of ammonium nitrate seized years ago by the government and stored at the blast site, according to The *New York Times*.

Lebanon's dire economic crisis, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, is pushing people into a struggle for survival, Catholic and other humanitarian agencies warn, as growing numbers of families can no longer afford the basic food, electricity, hygiene, water and cooking fuel needed to live. On top of that, power cuts last up to 20 hours a day.

With Lebanon's currency collapse by 80% of its value since last October, spiraling inflation and unemployment running about 55%, the Catholic Near East Welfare Association/Pontifical Mission's Michel Constantin explained that Lebanon does not have a social safety net, but the Catholic Church is reaching out to help the destitute.

An agency of the Holy See, CNEWA/Pontifical Mission works for, through and with the Eastern Catholic churches to address pastoral needs and deliver humanitarian aid.

"People have lost their jobs, are stuck at home with no employment and are getting hungry. We are distributing food, life-saving items such as medicines, food and milk for children for families who have lost jobs. Not to fight poverty, but to save lives," Constantin told Catholic News Service by phone from Beirut.

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"This crisis hits everybody—Lebanese families, Palestinian and Syrian refugees alike. We will start seeing children dying from hunger before the end of the year," warned Jad Sakr, acting country director of Save the Children in Lebanon.

A recent report by the U.N. World Food Program said 50% of Lebanese citizens—along with 63 percent of Palestinians and 75 percent of Syrians in the country—had expressed doubts they would find enough food over the previous month.

For many Lebanese, aspects of the COVID-19 crisis also recall painful memories of the 1975–1990 civil war, said American Emily Redfern volunteering with Fratelli Project, supported by CNEWA/Pontifical Mission and a partner reaching those in need.

"If we offer a choice between hygiene or food boxes the families will all choose food ... every time," Redfern explained. Speaking of the head of a household in one family she said, "He's too proud to accept help, it's a good thing his wife is not, otherwise I don't know how they would be eating."

"CNEWA/Pontifical Mission made an appeal in New York in coordination and partnership with the Oriental Congregation in the name of the pope for the victims of COVID-19 in our area (Mideast)," Constantin said.

He said the agency was choosing to help "the poorest of the poor, not the disadvantaged, but the ones one who cannot make it alone. Our partners have screened those in extreme need of life-saving items," Constantin said of his group's operations, based in Beirut, but covering Syria, Iraq and Egypt in addition to Lebanon.

So far, donations of about $500,000 have been received and are being used in all four countries struggling from coronavirus outbreaks; those countries also have

conflict, economic woes, and are housing refugees from regional wars.

CNEWA/Pontifical Mission's Constantin said he and nine others are also serving on a crisis cell team under the leadership of Lebanon's top Catholic cleric, Cardinal Bechara Rai, Maronite patriarch. Team members help the church to better "identify and prioritize needs," while appealing for assistance from Lebanese in the diaspora, foreign governments as well as Catholic and international nongovernmental organizations.

"We have created a network in Lebanon to help families in need and keep any family from dying of hunger," Cardinal Rai told Vatican Radio recently. "Half of the Lebanese population lives without the food they need, and many are out of work."

Caritas Lebanon, St. Vincent de Paul and other institutions as well as parishes are part of this cooperative network.

Rita Rhayem, who directs Caritas Lebanon, warned that the international community has largely remained silent as organizations struggle to aid not only Lebanese, but also Syrian refugees and migrant workers.

Caritas helps provide housing assistance and food to refugees and shelter to foreign domestic workers evicted by employers who can no longer afford their services, but the Catholic humanitarian agency also must seek resources for this aid.

"The last couple of months have been really challenging for Caritas Lebanon: The number of beneficiaries has tripled while the people who used to support us can no longer do so," Rhayem told a July news conference presenting Caritas Internationalis' annual report in Rome.