

Canada launches a Lebanon relief fund after Beirut blast

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Sat, 2020-08-08 18:16

MONTREAL: The Canadian government announced on Saturday the launch of a Lebanon relief fund, calling on citizens to give generously to victims of the massive explosion that killed more than 150 people and injured 6,000 in Beirut.

"Every dollar donated by individual Canadians between August fourth and 24th will be matched by the government of Canada... up to a maximum of Can\$2 million," or \$1.5 million, said International Development Minister Karina Gould at a news conference.

The money will go to the Humanitarian Coalition, which brings together a dozen Canadian humanitarian organizations on the ground in Lebanon, she said. It will use its expertise to distribute the aid in areas such as water supply, sanitation, food and shelter.

"I encourage Canadians to donate to the Lebanon Matching Fund to help save lives and meet the urgent needs of the affected population," said the minister, adding it was the best way for citizens to help.

The assistance is part of the Can\$5 million aid package announced earlier this week by Ottawa.

A group of Lebanese-Canadian businessmen has announced plans to raise at least \$2.5 million to help the disaster-stricken population.

Tuesday's massive explosion leveled Beirut port and killed at least 158 people.

A fire at the port had ignited a large stock of ammonium nitrate, triggering an explosion that was felt as far away as Cyprus and destroyed entire neighborhoods.

It was widely perceived as a direct consequence of corruption and incompetence, an egregious case of callousness on the part of an already reviled ruling elite.



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Lebanese diaspora in London protest in support of Beirut protesters
Rafiq Hariri's son blames Hezbollah, 'corrupt' elite for Beirut explosion

['Your time is up': Thousands protest against Netanyahu over economy, corruption allegations](#)

Author:

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Sat, 2020-08-08 18:17

JERUSALEM: Thousands of Israelis rallied outside Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's residence in Jerusalem on Saturday as anger mounted over

corruption allegations and his handling of the coronavirus crisis.

"Your time is up," read the giant letters projected onto a building at the protest site, as demonstrators waved Israeli flags and called on Netanyahu to resign over what they say is his failure to protect jobs and businesses affected by the pandemic.

The protest movement has intensified in recent weeks, with critics accusing Netanyahu of being distracted by a corruption case against him, in which he denies wrongdoing.

The right-wing leader, who was sworn in for a fifth term in May after a closely-fought election, has accused the protesters of trampling democracy and the Israeli media of encouraging dissent.

Protests have stretched beyond Netanyahu's official residence in Jerusalem, with many Israelis gathering on bridges and highway junctions across the country.

On a busy highway overpass north of Israel's commercial hub of Tel Aviv, demonstrators waved black flags and chanted slogans while cars honked their horns from the road below.

One protester, Yael, said she had lost her job at a Tel Aviv restaurant and that government aid has been slow to come.

"You'd think that a once-in-a-lifetime crisis like this would push Netanyahu to act, and it hasn't. Enough is enough," she said, declining to give her last name.

Israel in May lifted a partial lockdown that had flattened an infection curve. But a second surge of COVID-19 cases and ensuing restrictions has seen Netanyahu's approval ratings plunge to under 30%.

Many restrictions have since been lifted to revive business activity, but unemployment hovers at 21.5% and the economy is expected to contract by 6% in 2020.



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Netanyahu warns foes after Israeli retaliatory strikes in Syria
Israeli artist takes aim at Netanyahu with life-size statue

[Seth Rogen's Israel comments highlight fraught diaspora ties](#)

Sat, 2020-08-08 01:24

TEL AVIV: It began as a lighthearted conversation between two Jewish comedians, riffing on a podcast about the idiosyncrasies of their shared heritage. But after talk turned to Israel, it didn't take long for Marc Maron and Seth Rogen to spark an uproar.

Their comments about Israel – especially Rogen saying the country “doesn't make sense” – infuriated many Israel supporters and highlighted the country's tenuous relationship with young, progressive Jewish critics in the diaspora.

Israel has long benefited from financial and political support from American Jews. But in recent years the country has faced a groundswell of opposition from young progressives, disillusioned by Israel's aggressive West Bank settlement building, its perceived exclusion of liberal streams of Judaism and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's cosy relationship with President Donald Trump.

"What Seth Rogen said is par for the course among our generation and the Israeli government has to wake up and see that their actions have consequences," said Yonah Lieberman, spokesman for If Not Now, an American Jewish organization opposed to Israel's entrenched occupation of the West Bank.

Rogen's remarks follow a dramatic shift by an influential Jewish American commentator who recently endorsed the idea of a democratic entity of Jews and Palestinians living with equal rights on the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Peter Beinart's argument that a two-state solution – Israel and Palestine – is no longer possible sent shock waves through the Jewish establishment and Washington policymaking circles.

For many Jews, Israel is an integral part of their identity, on religious grounds or as an insurance policy in the wake of the Holocaust and in a modern age of resurgent anti-Semitism. But polls have shown that while most American Jews identify with Israel and feel a connection to the country, that support has waned over recent years, especially among millennials.

Some have even embraced the Palestinian-led movement calling for boycotts, divestment and sanctions against Israel to protest what it says is Israeli oppression of Palestinians. Israel accuses the movement of waging a campaign to delegitimize its very existence.

SPEEDREAD

Their comments about Israel – especially Rogen saying the country 'doesn't make sense' – highlighted the country's tenuous relationship with young, progressive Jewish critics in the diaspora.

In the podcast, Rogen, who appeared in such smash comedies as "Superbad" and "Knocked Up," talked about attending Jewish schools and Jewish summer camp while growing up in Vancouver. He said his parents met on an Israeli kibbutz. As they continued to chat, Rogen appeared to question why Israel was established.

"You don't keep all your Jews in one basket. I don't understand why they did that. It makes no sense whatsoever," Rogen said. "You don't keep something you're trying to preserve all in one place especially when that place has proven to be pretty volatile. I'm trying to keep all these things safe. I'm going to put them in my blender and hope that that's the best place to, that'll do it."

Rogen then said he was "fed a huge amount of lies" about Israel during his youth. "They never tell you that 'oh, by the way, there were people there.' They make it seem like, 'the (expletive) door's open.'"

Maron and Rogen both joked about how frightened they were about the responses they would receive from Israel's defenders. Their concerns were justified.

Rogen's comments immediately lit up "Jewish Twitter." They unleashed a flurry of critical op-eds in Jewish and Israeli media. And they prompted Rogen to call Isaac Herzog, the head of the Jewish Agency, a major nonprofit that works to foster relations between Israel and the Jewish world.

In a Facebook post, Herzog said he and Rogen had a frank and open conversation. He said Rogen "was misunderstood and apologized" for his comments.

"I told him that many Israelis and Jews around the world were personally hurt by his statement, which implies the denial of Israel's right to exist," Herzog wrote.

In an interview with the Israeli daily Haaretz, Rogen said he called Herzog at the urging of his mother and he denied apologizing. He said the comments were made in jest and misconstrued.

"I don't want Jews to think that I don't think Israel should exist. And I understand how they could have been led to think that," he said.

Rogen also said he is a "proud Jew." He said his criticism was aimed at the education he received, and he believed he could have been given a deeper picture of a "complex" situation.

Ironically, Rogen was on the podcast to promote his new movie, "An American Pickle," about a Jewish immigrant to the US at the start of the 20th century who falls into a vat of pickle brine and emerges 100 years later. He called the project a "very Jewish film."

Lieberman, from If Not Now, said the uproar shows "how much the conversation has changed" about Israel among American Jews.

Shmuel Rosner, a senior fellow with the Jewish People Policy Institute, a Jerusalem think tank, said Israel should not be expected to change its "security and foreign policies" based on growing estrangement from Jews overseas.

But he said it can take realistic steps to close the gap, such as establishing a pluralistic prayer site at the Western Wall, long a sticking point between Israel's Orthodox establishment and more liberal Jews in the US "It's a challenge for Israel. It's inconvenient. We want everyone to love us, especially other Jews," he said. "Israel can do certain things to make it somewhat better."



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Palestinian woman killed in West Bank as Israelis, Palestinians clash
Israeli military sets up coronavirus task force

[‘They killed us twice’: Finding loved ones at last among Syria’s tortured dead](#)

Sat, 2020-08-08 01:18

AMMAN/BERLIN: Some families say it is better to know and mourn. Others say finally learning what happened is worse than dying themselves. Hundreds of victims of Syria’s torture chambers are only now being discovered, thanks to a new effort to identify bodies from tens of thousands of photos smuggled out of Damascus 7 years ago. For their families, an image of a broken body with a number tag is all that lies at the end of the quest. “They died starved and naked,” said Um Munzer Yaseen, 58, who, after sifting through countless photos of emaciated corpses, finally found her son, Jamil, last month. A computer engineer, Jamil had been missing since one night in June, 2011,

when he was taken by secret police from the family flat in Damascus. In the picture his mother found of his body, his eyes had been gouged out and his legs were broken.

"If they had shot my son it would have been better to die with a bullet than go through this hell," she said in Amman, where she and her husband have found sanctuary since fleeing Syria in 2013.

Her husband, a doctor, said: "They killed us twice – when they arrested him and took him, and the second time when we saw the pictures." He asked: "Are we not human?"

Jamil's image was among 53,275 photos smuggled on discs and thumb drives out of Syria by a former Syrian army photographer, codenamed Caesar, who fled in August 2013. It was his job to record the deaths in military prisons.

If they had shot my son it would have been better to die with a bullet than go through this hell.

Um Munzer Yaseen, a Syrian mother

Caesar is hiding in an undisclosed country out of fear of reprisals against him and his family, some friends said. Reuters could not immediately reach him for comment.

Now, years after Caesar's photos first came to public attention, they are back in the spotlight. The toughest US sanctions yet came into force in June for alleged war crimes against the civilian population, under a law named after Caesar.

President Bashar Assad has not commented directly on the Caesar photographs since a 2015 interview, when he dismissed them as "allegations without evidence."

The Syrian Information Ministry and the Syrian UN mission did not respond to Reuters emailed requests for comment about the Caesar photographs and evidence of systematic torture.

Human rights groups believe Caesar's photos contain images of 6,785 detainees, most tortured to death by the Syrian authorities in the early months of the uprising that evolved into Syria's civil war, now in its ninth year.

The state of the tortured, mutilated and starved bodies makes it hard to identify them, said Fadel Abdel Ghani, the Doha-based chairman of a group, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, which says it has identified 900 victims so far.

With the renewed attention, campaigners have launched a new push to identify the dead.

The images first came to light in 2014, the year after Caesar defected, but after the sanctions were imposed they have been re-released on activists' social media platforms, giving families a fresh chance to find missing loved ones.



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Syria doctors fear virus spreading faster than clinics can test
Netanyahu warns foes after Israeli retaliatory strikes in Syria

[‘No way we can rebuild’: Lebanese count huge losses after Beirut blast](#)

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Fri, 2020-08-07 10:22

BEIRUT: Beirut residents began trying to rebuild their shattered lives on Friday after the biggest blast in the Lebanese capital's history tore into the city, killing at least 154 and leaving the heavily indebted nation with another huge reconstruction bill.

The search for those missing since Tuesday's blast intensified overnight, as rescuers sifted rubble in a frantic race to find anyone still alive after the explosion smashed a swathe of the city and sent shockwaves around the region. Security forces fired teargas at a furious crowd late on Thursday, as anger boiled over at the government and a political elite, who have presided over a

nation that was facing economic collapse even before the deadly port blast injured 5,000 people.

The small crowd, some hurling stones, marked a return to the kind of protests that had become a feature of life in Beirut, as Lebanese watched their savings evaporate and currency disintegrate, while government decision-making floundered.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

“There is no way we can rebuild this house. Where is the state?” Tony Abdou, an unemployed 60-year-old, sitting in the family home in Gemmayze, a district that lies a few hundred meters from the port warehouses where highly explosive material was stored for years, a ticking time bomb next to a densely populated area.

As Abdou spoke, a domestic water boiler fell through the ceiling of his cracked home, while volunteers from the neighborhood turned out on the street to sweep up debris.

“Do we actually have a government here?” said taxi driver Nassim Abiaad, 66, whose cab was crushed by falling building wreckage just as he was about to get into the vehicle.

“There is no way to make money anymore,” he said.

The government has promised a full investigation and put several port employees under house arrest. State news agency NNA said 16 people were taken into custody. But for many Lebanese, the explosion was symptomatic of the years of neglect by the authorities while state corruption thrived.

Shockwaves

Officials have said the blast, whose seismic impact was recorded hundreds of miles (kilometers) away, might have caused losses amounting to \$15 billion – a bill the country cannot pay when it has already defaulted on its mountain of national debt, exceeding 150% of economic output, and talks about a lifeline from the International Monetary Fund have stalled.

Hospitals, many heavily damaged as shockwaves ripped out windows and pulled down ceilings, have been overwhelmed by the number of casualties. Many were struggling to find enough foreign exchange to buy supplies before the explosion.

In the port area, rescue teams set up arc lights to work through the night in a dash to find those still missing, as families waited tensely, slowly losing hope of ever seeing loved ones again. Some victims were hurled into the sea because of the explosive force.

The weeping mother of one of the missing called a prime time TV program on Thursday night to plead with the authorities to find her son, Joe. He was found – dead – hours later.

Lebanese Red Cross Secretary General George Kettaneh told local radio VDL that three more bodies had been found in the search, while the health minister said on Friday the death toll had climbed to 154. Dozens are still unaccounted for.

Charbel Abreeni, who trained port employees, showed Reuters pictures on his phone of killed colleagues. He was sitting in a church where the head from the statue of the Virgin Mary had been blown off.

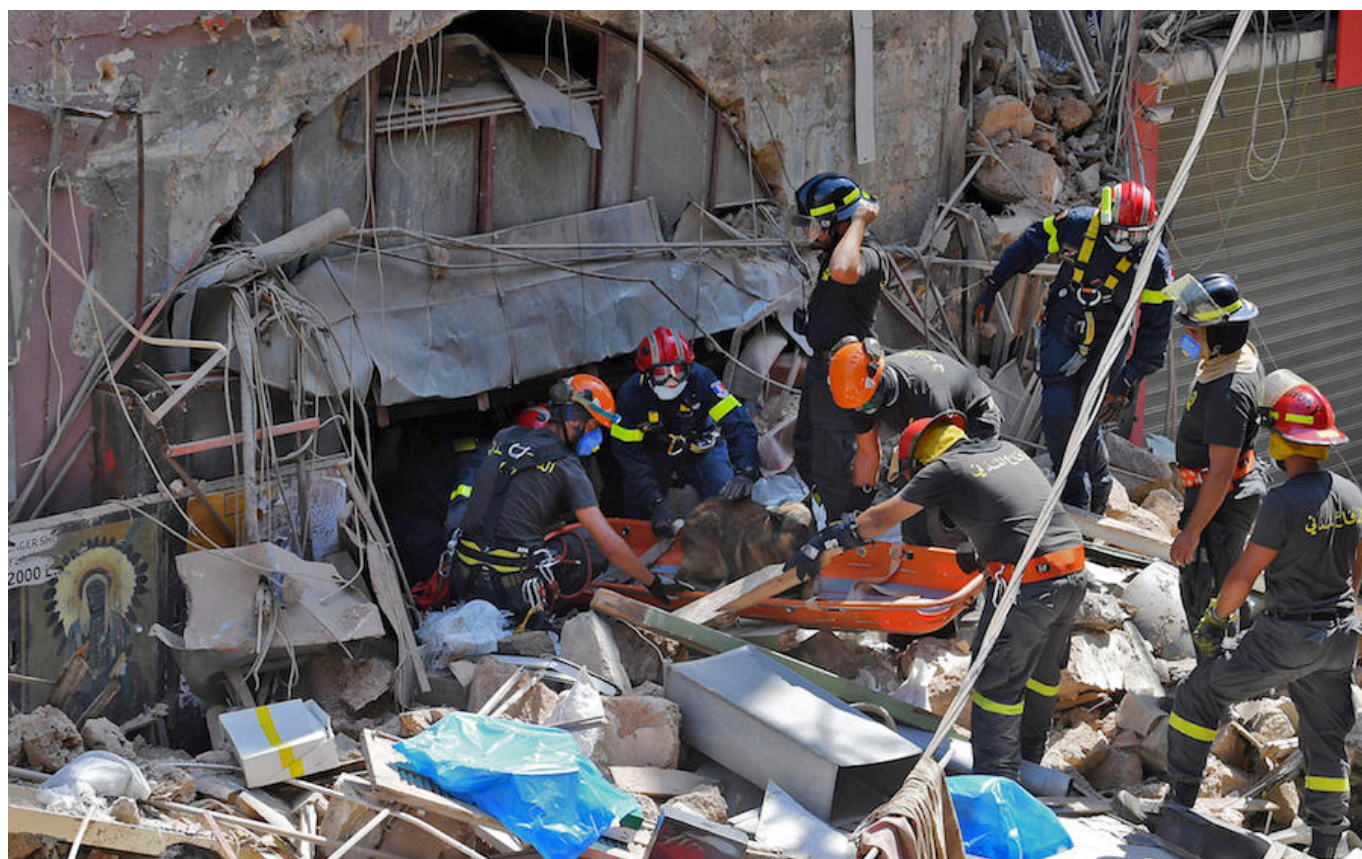
"I know 30 port employees who died, two of them are my close friends and a third is missing," said the 62-year-old, whose home was wrecked in the blast. His shin was bandaged.

"I have nowhere to go except my wife's family," he said. "How can you survive here, the economy is zero?"

Offers of immediate medical and food aid have poured in from Arab states, Western nations and beyond. But none, so far, address the bigger challenges facing a bankrupt nation.

French President Emmanuel Macron came to the city on Thursday with a cargo from France. He promised to explain some "home truths" to the government, telling them they needed to root out corruption and deliver economic reforms. He was greeted on the street by many Lebanese who asked for help in ensuring "regime" change, so a new set of politicians could rebuild Beirut and set the nation on a new course.

Beirut still bore scars from heavy shelling in the 1975-1990 civil war before the blast. After the explosion, chunks of the city once again look like a war zone.



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At Beirut's 'ground zero', race to find survivors
Deadly Beirut blast could have been missile attack or bomb, says president