

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Minister for Women

Senator the Hon Marise Payne

Senate Statement - Anniversary of the Beirut Port Explosion on 4 August 2020

04 August 2021

E&OE

Mr President, when Australians first heard of the explosion at the port of Beirut, it was an incomprehensible disaster. The mobile phone videos of the sudden explosion, with its massive white shock wave, were truly horrifying. The detonation was so large that it registered on the global detection network of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty Organisation.

More than 215 people died, more than 7,000 were injured, and more than 300,000 were displaced because their homes were lost. Lebanon has not recovered from its grief, nor from its damage. That day also took the life of an Australian citizen: two-year old Isaac Oehlers. Today we remember Isaac, and we once more offer our deep and sincere condolences to his parents Sarah and Craig, and their families, in their immeasurable grief.

Mr President, Australia once more reiterates our strong and unequivocal support for a full, credible and transparent investigation into the explosion, and for those responsible to be held to account for acts of omission, commission, or corruption.

Tonight, Australia will participate in the third 'International Conference to Support the Population of Lebanon', co-hosted by the President of France, His Excellency Emmanuel Macron, and the Secretary General of the United Nations, His Excellency Antonio Guterres. A year after the explosion, Lebanon is facing a more complex crisis: a slide towards the collapse of Lebanon's political and socio-economic model. Already, according to the UN, 1.5 million people can no longer afford their essential needs.

Australia fully supports international efforts to assist with the Lebanon Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework, known as "3RF", which aims to help Lebanon achieve three central goals in response to the Beirut port explosion:

- First, a people-centred recovery that returns sustainable livelihoods.
- Second, the reconstruction of critical assets and infrastructure.

- Third, the implementation of reform to help restore people's trust in government institutions by improving governance and accountability.

Australia's assistance package to Lebanon of \$15 million, channelled directly through international organisations and NGOs, assists Lebanon's direct needs, and contributes to a range of additional imperatives, including supporting displaced Syrians and Palestinians now living in Lebanon.

As we all know, Australia is home to around 230,000 citizens of Lebanese heritage; many of my friends in Sydney are part of this vibrant diaspora; and around 20,000 Australians are living in Lebanon. What happens in Lebanon affects us here, too. I know how deeply they felt the tragedy of the explosion.

The Lebanese diaspora in Australia of all faiths, including Christian, Muslim, Druze and others, has been incredibly generous in its donations to international organisations, NGOs and charities as a way to assist those in Lebanon, and I want to acknowledge this warmly. I have had many meetings with the Lebanese communities in Australia, and am indebted to their tireless efforts, particularly those of Bishop Antoine Tarabay, his broad parish, and his excellent advocacy for reform and accountability in Lebanon.

I also wish to acknowledge the Ambassador to Lebanon, Her Excellency Rebekah Grindlay, and all her staff, who suffered through the explosion themselves with their families, but returned immediately to work despite what had happened to them, to the city in which they had made their home, to help Australians in need of consular assistance, and to work with the Lebanese Government and our international partners.

Mr President, there is a great deal of work ahead for the international community, and for the Lebanese people, if we are to avoid the tragedy of the Beirut explosion becoming an even greater tragedy for all of Lebanon. Mr President, Australia will continue to play its part in helping Lebanon with humanitarian assistance, meaningful reforms, better governance, and genuine accountability.