



Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (centre), takes part in Friday prayers in Hagia Sophia, at the historic Sultanahmet district of Istanbul on Aug 7. Erdogan joined worshippers on July 24 for the first Muslim prayers in 86 years inside the Istanbul landmark that served as one of Christendom's most significant cathedrals, a mosque and a museum before its conversion back into a Muslim place of worship. (AP)

Searchers in Beirut 'recover' more bodies days after blast

16 port staffers arrested over explosion

BEIRUT, Aug 8, (AP): Rescue teams pulled more bodies from the rubble of Beirut's port Friday, nearly three days after a massive explosion sent a wave of destruction through Lebanon's capital, killing nearly 150 people and wounding thousands.

Outside the port area, women cried as they waited for news about missing relatives.

Among the four bodies recovered in the last 24 hours was that of 23-year-old Joe Akiki, a port worker missing since Tuesday's explosion. His body was found in the rubble near a grain silo that was shredded along with other buildings in the port.

The explosion also devastated nearby residential neighborhoods, blowing out windows and wrecking facades for miles around.

French and Russian rescue teams with dogs searched the port area Friday, a day after French President Emmanuel Macron visited the site, promising aid while demanding reform from Lebanon's long-entrenched political leaders.

"Our experience shows that we can find people alive until up to 72, 75 or 80 hours after an explosion or an earthquake, so for now we are still in time and we cling on to this hope," said Col. Vincent Tissier, head of the French team.

The blast apparently was caused by the ignition of 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate, a chemical used for explosives and fertilizer that had been stored at the port since it was confiscated from an impounded cargo ship in 2013.

An investigation has been started by the government, which has come under mounting criticism after many Lebanese blamed the catastrophe on negligence and corruption.

Several countries have sent search and rescue teams to Beirut, where dozens are still missing.

A team of 55 French rescuers that began work Thursday has found four bodies, according to Vincent, of the French Civil Protection. Lebanese firefighters are also working at the demolished port, where bulldozers and excavators churned through the rubble.

An initial government assessment said 300,000 people - more than 12% of Beirut's population - had to leave homes damaged or left uninhabitable by the explosion. Many of them have since returned, or are staying in second homes or with friends and relatives. Officials have estimated losses at \$10 billion to \$15 billion.

Damaged hospitals, already strained by the coronavirus pan-



A man looks at the scene of Tuesday's explosion that hit the seaport of Beirut, Lebanon on Aug 7, 2020. Rescue teams were still searching the rubble of Beirut's port for bodies on Friday, nearly three days after a massive explosion sent a wave of destruction through Lebanon's capital. (AP)

dem, are still struggling to deal with the wounded.

The investigation is focusing on port and customs officials, with 16 employees detained and others questioned. But many Lebanese say it points to much greater rot that permeates the political system and extends to the country's top leadership.

For decades, Lebanon has been dominated by the same political elites - many of them former warlords and militia commanders from the 1975-1990 civil war. The ruling factions use public institutions to accumulate wealth and distribute patronage to supporters. Thirty years after the civil war ended, power outages are still frequent, trash often goes uncollected and tap water is largely undrinkable.

Blast

Even before the blast, the country was mired in a severe economic crisis that was also widely blamed on the political class. Unemployment was soaring, and a collapse of the local currency wiped out many people's savings. That will make the task of rebuilding after the blast even more daunting.

Macron said France would lead international efforts to provide aid but would not give "blank checks to a system that no longer has the trust of its people."

France, which has close ties to its former colony, has also sent a team of 22 investigators to help probe the cause of the blast. Based on information from Lebanon so far, France's No. 2 forensic police official, Dominique Abbenanti, said Friday the explosion "appears to be an accident" but that it's too early to say for sure.

In an interview with The Associated Press, he predicted "the death toll will grow."

French investigators are involved at the request of Lebanon and also because one French citizen was

killed and at least 40 were injured in the blast.

French police could later question witnesses or suspects, said Eric Berot, chief of a unit involved in the investigation. For now, the French team is dividing up zones to cover with their Lebanese counterparts and will use drones to study the area.

"The zone is enormous. It's a titanic job," Berot said. The investigation is complicated by the huge scale of the damage and "the Lebanese situation," he said, referring to the political and economic crisis.

The U.N. human rights office called for an independent investigation, insisting "victims' calls for accountability must be heard."

Rupert Colville, a spokesman for the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, cited the need for the international community to help Lebanon with both a quick response and sustained engagement.

He said Lebanon is facing the "triple tragedy of the socio-economic crisis, COVID-19 and the ammonium nitrate explosion." Colville urged Lebanese leaders to "overcome political stalemates and address the grievances of the population."

Meanwhile, Lebanon's state-run news agency says 16 employees at Beirut's port have been detained over this week's explosion that killed more than 100 people and wounded thousands.

The National News Agency quoted Government Commissioner to the Military Court Judge Fadi Akiki as saying on Thursday that 18 people have been questioned so far. All of them are port and customs officials, as well as individuals in charge of maintenance at the hangar where 2,750 tons of explosive materials have been stored for years.

Akiki said that the investigation began shortly after the blast occurred on Tuesday evening and will continue to cover all suspects in the explosion.

News in Brief

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia reported on Friday 38 additional COVID-19 deaths, along with 1,567 new cases.

Saudi Ministry of Health said in a daily report that the death toll increased to 3,093 fatalities and the overall infections were 285,793 cases.

Recovery cases amounted to 248,948 after recording 1,859 people. (KUNA)

DUBAI: UAE declared on Friday that it registered a couple of deaths and 216 new infections in the past 24 hours.

According to Emirates News Agency (WAM), coronavirus infections tally upped to 62,061 cases, as well as deaths, reaching 365 cases.

More than 276 patients were cured from the virus to reach a total of 56,015 recoveries. (KUNA)

MANAMA: Up to 159 people who suffered from infection with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) succumbed to the fatal respiratory disease during past hours.

The local health department said in a statement on Friday 375 people were diagnosed with the contagion.

A total of 39,945 patients have been

healed, after recording names of 369 ones who recuperated.

Figure of existing cases stands at 2,786. (KUNA)

DOHA: Qatari Ministry of Health announced on Friday recording two new deaths with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) raising tally of mortalities to 180. The department said in a statement there were 291 new infection cases, thus the whole count of the contaminations soared to 112,383.

It also reported 311 new recovery cases; with tally of the patients who were cured of the contagion standing at 109,142. (KUNA)

CAIRO: The Egyptian Ministry of Health announced Friday registering 141 new COVID-19 infection cases and 20 fatalities from the disease over the past 24 hours.

The figures took the overall infections to 95,147 and the death toll to 4,971, the ministry's spokesman Dr Khaled Mujahed said in a press release.

The recoveries went up by 1,655 to 50,553, he added. (KUNA)

RABAT: The Moroccan health ministry

on Friday announced 12 deaths and 1,018 infections due to COVID-19.

The ministry, in the daily briefing, said that the number of total infections surged to 30,662 while deaths came to 461. It added that total recoveries reached 21,548 after recording 995 new cases. (KUNA)

RAMALLAH: Palestinian Health Minister May Al-Kaila declared on Friday that the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) took lives of five people and more than 514 others tested positive for the virus.

Al-Kaila also stated in a statement that death cases rose up to 97, while infections tally topped to 17,984 cases.

Recovered cases also went up by 53 percent, whereas infections went down by 46 percent, she added. (KUNA)

MUSCAT: Sultanate of Oman witnessed 354 new infection cases with the dreaded bug, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), during the past hours.

Official Oman News Agency (OMNA) said on Friday whole count of contaminations with the germ hit 81,067. Meanwhile, recoveries were counted at 72,263, in addition to the total deaths, 502. (KUNA)

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Homoud Al-Nasrallah

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