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08.06.20

Budget is due August 25 or Knesset will automatically dissolve forcing elections

08.06.20

Haredi leaders urge PM, Gantz to pass budget, avoid 'madness' of elections

If a state budget is does not pass by August 25, the Knesset will automatically dissolve and a snap election will be called, Israel's fourth in little more than a year

i24NEWS, Ynet | Published: 08.06.20 , 22:33

As the battle over Israel's next budget intensifies within the coalition, the heads of the ultra-Orthodox parties said Thursday they will not cooperate with "any initiative to advance the elections."

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been pushing for a short-term three-month budget plan while Defense Minister Benny Gantz has maintained the budget should be biennial - as stipulated in the coalition agreement.

According to Israel's Basic Laws, a newly-formed government has to pass a budget within 90 days of its establishment, which in this case would be August 25. If the government doesn't pass it by then - parliament will disperse and a snap election will automatically be called, Israel's fourth in little more than a year.

"Passing the state budget is a must," Interior Minister Aryeh Deri, Construction and Housing Minister Yaakov Litzman and United Torah Judaism co-leader MK Moshe Gafni said in a joint statement.

"The citizens of Israel are facing difficult, health and economic problems during these days, and the very thought of going to the polls at this time is complete madness," they wrote.

Still, they did not specify their position on which budget should be passed.

The two further urged Netanyahu and Gantz to show "national responsibility and reach an agreement.

The defense minister's Blue & White party replied in a statement that "the citizens of Israel will not forgive he who drags the state to elections in a medical and economic emergency period... we must pass an annual budget as all Israeli economists recommend."

08.06.20

Israeli tribute starts fundraising campaign for disaster-stricken Lebanon

08.06.20

Israeli NGO starts fundraising campaign for disaster-stricken Lebanon

The organization set its goal to raise NIS 1 million that will be used to supply Lebanon with food, clothing, and medical equipment; founder Gal Lusky calls on Israelis to pitch in and support the cause

Atilla Somfalvi | Updated: 08.06.20 , 22:14

Humanitarian NGO Israeli Flying Aid (IFA) has launched a crowd-funding campaign to those affected by an explosion that devastated the Lebanese capital of Beirut and left many of the city's residents homeless or in grave need of aid.

The IAF set its goal to raise NIS 1 million that will be used to supply Lebanon with food, clothing, and medical equipment.

Speaking to Ynet, IFA founder and CEO Gal Lusky called on Israelis to pitch in and support the cause.

"I call on us, the citizens of Israel, to donate for the residents of Beirut," said Lusky. "I think it is important that we show the beating heart of Israeli civil society, which is based on the DNA that sanctifies life. This has been our little duty for years. Both to identify with the terrible grief and with the suffering."

Lusky added she was proud of the tribute paid by the Tel Aviv municipality, lighting up the city hall building with the colors of the Lebanese flag.

"This expresses uncompromising solidarity with their suffering while opposing the harming of innocents. I am proud of the Tel Aviv municipality for the move, it warms my heart, and I am sure that also the hearts of many Israelis and Jews in Israel and around the world."

During the interview, Lusky added that the IAF often offers aid and operates in countries Israel has no official diplomatic relations with.

"This includes Sudan, Iraq, Indonesia, Syria and many other countries," said Lusky. "I think our greatest achievement as a society is not to drown in our own struggles and certainly not act out of existential anxiety during a dialogue with Lebanon. There is Lebanon and then there is Hezbollah."

Lusky added that her project seeks to transcend political intrigue.

"This includes the prime ministers and Hezbollah. This will allow a true dialog between mothers and fathers from Israel, and mothers and fathers on the other side."

The official death toll in Beirut now stands at 137, and the number of injured nears 5,000. Up to a quarter of a million residents have been displaced from their homes.

08.05.20

State deficit climbs 7.2% to NIS 70 billion as income shrinks from pandemic

08.05.20

State budget deficit climbs to NIS 70 billion

Deficit accounts for 7.2% of budget; as result of coronavirus pandemic, state income shrinks by nearly NIS 32 billion, this despite population increasing by 2% over past year

Gad Lior| Published: 08.05.20 , 19:18

Israel state budget deficit has climbed to NIS 70 billion, compared to NIS 24 billion in August 2019, representing 7.2% of the budget, according to data released by the Finance Ministry on Wednesday.

The increase in government spending as a result of the coronavirus pandemic since its beginning adds up to NIS 22.6 billion so far.

State income as a result of the crisis has shrunk by nearly NIS 32 billion – NIS 20 billion less in tax revenue and another NIS 12 billion lost in national insurance payments.

All of this, despite the fact Israel's population grew by 2% in the last year.

Ministerial expenses have gone up by 11%, but due to a state budget not being approved yet – it does not include the expenses paid to deal with the coronavirus pandemic – it is a decrease of 0.5% from last year.

The rise in ministry spending stems from the current budget law, that states that in the absence of a government budget, ministries are allotted each month 1/12 of the amount approved in the previous budget

As of Wednesday, NIS 56.9 billion of the government's aid packages approved to deal with the economic crisis.

The budget deficit for July 2020 was NIS 12 billion, and over the past 12 months has reached NIS 98.4 billion.

08.05.20

Beirut blast, around 200,000 missiles in the Lebanon port created a mushroom cloud

08.05.20

Former MK celebrates Beirut blast, calls it 'spectacular pyrotechnics show'

Firebrand activist claims Hezbollah missiles that 'could reach any strategic point in Israel' and allegedly stored in chemical depot created gigantic explosion that flattened large swaths of Lebanese capital

Roe Rubinstein| Published: 08.05.20 , 17:24

Zehut Party Chairman and former MK Moshe Feiglin published on Wednesday a Facebook post celebrating a massive explosion in the port of Beirut in Lebanon, which left at least a hundred people dead and injured thousands, and called it "a spectacular pyrotechnics show."

"In honor of Tu B'Av – the Jewish holiday of love which took place on Tuesday and Wednesday, we got a "spectacular pyrotechnics show" in the port of Beirut," wrote the former firebrand politician. "You don't really believe this was just a messy fuel depot, right? You do realize that this inferno was supposed to land on us as a rain of rockets?"

I have a bit of experience with explosives. The largest explosion I took part in was 2.5 tons of TNT. What we saw yesterday in the port of Beirut was much bigger. Its **destructive effect** (minus the radiation) was **equivalent to a mini-nuclear bomb.**" Pay close attention to the videos taken from sea, to the huge vacuum at the center of the blast that sucked seawater into itself and **created a mushroom cloud resembling a nuclear blast.** Granted, the horrible effect of radiation isn't there, but **this was dispersed** over precise **explosive heads of around 200,000 missiles** that could reach any strategic point in Israel."

Feiglin also criticized Israel's withdrawal from the South Lebanon Security Belt in 2000, a swath of land captured by Israel in 1982 and separated its northern border towns from Lebanese terrorists.

"I have been warning for years that the withdrawal from Lebanon and the new strategic balance against Hezbollah... put Israel into a balance of terror that is equivalent to a nuclear bomb by the terrorist organization on our northern border," Feiglin wrote.

"Today is Tu B'Av, it is a day to rejoice – and a sincere and great thanks to the Lord and all the geniuses and heroes (!) who organized this marvelous celebration in honor of the holiday of love."

Feiglin is a veteran ultranationalist libertarian activist and former member of Knesset on behalf of the ruling Likud Party. He ran for Knesset a number of times with his Zehut Party - which promotes libertarian policies and rose to prominence due to its push to legalize recreational use of cannabis - but failed repeatedly to pass the electoral threshold. The Red Cross reported Wednesday morning that over 100 people have died and 4,000 others were injured in a massive explosion that shook the Lebanese capital on Tuesday.

Following the heavy destruction, countries around the world have offered humanitarian aid to Lebanon, among them are Israel and Iran.

08.05.20

Annexation waiting for territory compensations during budget turmoil

08.05.20

Report: Annexation still on the table but window closing as U.S. election looms
Trump administration pushes for execution of plan before November 3 vote, waiting for 'gesture' from Palestinians and Israeli compensation for annexed territories before greenlighting move

i24NEWS| Published: 08.05.20 , 14:29

Preparations to enact Washington's plan for Middle East peace, which includes Israel **annexing parts of the West Bank**, are still in the works and **could be implemented** as early as **this month**, a source close to the White House told The Times of Israel.

Avi Berkowitz, the U.S. administration's envoy to the Middle East, is reportedly holding talks about the peace plan with a number of countries, as time is still needed for Washington to give its blessing regarding Israel's annexation plans.

U.S. President Donald Trump's administration is still waiting for "a gesture" from the Palestinians, the source said, but the process could begin in the near future. The window to enact such a historic move is closing quickly, however, as The United States' next presidential election, which will take place on November 3, inches closer - and a new administration could take office by January 20.

"It is, indeed, possible that Jerusalem and Washington will agree on a decision - possibly applying Israeli sovereignty over the Jordan Valley and all settlements, or only over one or more blocks in the Jerusalem area - as of this month," the source said.

"It would be unlikely that the White House would give the green light for annexation in September or thereafter, due to the upcoming November elections in the United States," the source added.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also spoke about the U.S. plan during a Likud faction meeting on Monday, saying it was "still on the agenda" but "the ball was in Washington's court."

The U.S. team wants to ensure, however, that any Israeli move will be accompanied by compensations in favor of the Palestinians, and Berkowitz is working in this direction, said the source on condition of anonymity, without giving further details.

While the Palestinian leadership refuses to engage with the Trump administration, reportedly, Washington still wants Ramallah not to be left behind, in case Israel gets the green light for the move.

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08.04.20

Gantz insists on a biennial budget & blasts Netanyahu on severe budget cut comments

08.04.20

Gantz: Netanyahu's budget comments 'fake news'

Blue & White leader implores Likud and PM to follow through coalition agreement and prevent further elections; Gantz warns Syria, Iran of Israeli response as tensions on northern frontier rise

Attila Somfalvi, Moran Azulay | Published: 08.04.20, 11:16

Defense Minister and Alternate Prime Minister Benny Gantz said that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's comment saying a biennial budget would lead to severe financial cuts was fake news.

"It's all fake. We must introduce a good financial plan for the good of the Israeli public," Gantz told the Ynet studio in an interview. "It's all a fairy tale, we need one budget, a stable one that takes into account the country's financial uncertainty, we can do this, it's only five quarters."

The state budget has become a contested issue in recent days as Gantz' Blue & White party insists on a biennial budget, while Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his Likud party insist on a short-term budget.

Gantz also spoke about the possibility the budget crisis would lead to another election. "Whoever does not abide by the agreement, which was signed only three months ago, will later have to provide explanations to what happened," the centrist leader said. "The ultra-Orthodox and all the partners are also responsible to fulfill the agreement."

The former IDF chief also said that his relations with the ultra-Orthodox parties were good and that they are seeking a long and stable arrangement.

"I think that elections and the lack of financial stability won't serve anyone in Israel," said Gantz.

Gantz expressed hope that recent tensions on the northern frontier will not escalate into a full-scale conflict.

"No one should try us. We won't allow [Syrian President Bashar] Assad to facilitate terror actions against the State of Israel, we won't allow Iran to open a branch of terror in Syria," said Gantz. "We will act against this. Wherever someone acts against the State of Israel, the State of Israel will respond. We're not looking for an escalation."

08.03.20

US Army \$373 million purchase, Iron Dome 12 launchers, 2 sensors, 240 interceptors

08.03.20

World's largest cargo plane lands in Israel to load Iron Dome batteries

Massive aircraft carrying U.S. military freight trucks touches ground and will transport defense system from Israel to defend American troops stationed in battlefields abroad
[24NEWS] Published: 08.03.20 , 18:09

The world's largest cargo plane landed in Ben Gurion Airport, carrying U.S. military 'Osh Kosh' trucks that were fitted with Iron Dome missile defense system batteries purchased by the U.S. Army before leaving Israel, the Defense Ministry announced on Monday.

In August 2019, The ministry had signed a \$373 million deal with the U.S. Defense Department to sell two off-the-shelf Iron Dome batteries to the American Army from Rafael which include 12 launchers, two sensors, two battlement management centers, and 240 interceptors.

Washington wanted to have the batteries delivered by 2020.

The system, developed by the ministry and prime contractor Rafael “will be used to defend U.S. military troops against a wide range of ballistic and aerial threats,” a Defense Ministry statement said.

The unloading of the Russian-made Antonov cargo plane was closed to the press.

This is the mammoth aircraft's second trip to Israel after it touched ground on the Holy Land in 2008.

The Antonov An-225 Mriya was created in the 1980s in Soviet Ukraine and is the heaviest aircraft ever built.

The AN-225 has over 30 wheels, six engines and a wingspan of 290ft. The aircraft has a range of 15,400 km when unloaded and 4,500 when fully loaded.

The aircraft had taken off from Maine and is expected to make refueling stops in Scotland and France.

08.03.20

Netanyahu stresses biennial budget has severe cuts, while we need funds for people

08.03.20

Netanyahu: biennial budget would lead to severe financial cuts

PM says immediate budget would allow state to allot funds necessary for plodding economy, asserts not interested in dragging Israel into another election; annexation of West Bank lands still 'not off the table'

Moran Azulay | Published: 08.03.20 , 17:23

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday reiterated his opposition to a biennial state budget, saying such a relatively long-term financial plan would lead to significant cuts that would hinder the economy's ability to bounce back from the coronavirus crisis.

"We must twig the meaning of approving a biennial budget. It means we'll have to deal with substantial financial cuts," said Netanyahu at the beginning of a Likud faction meeting. "This is the exact opposite of what should be done. This is not the time for cuts, this is the time to allot funds to the people."

We must continue for the welfare of the citizens of Israel, to open the education system, to transfer much-needed funds to the healthcare system – we'll achieve this with an immediate budget."

The state budget has become a highly contested issue within the coalition, as Netanyahu's main government partners, the Blue & White party, insist on a biennial budget as was agreed upon in the coalition deal between the centrist party and the premier's Likud party.

Netanyahu asserted he was not interested in dragging Israel into another election, the fourth in just under 20 months.

The Likud chairman also spoke about his intentions to extend Israeli sovereignty over Jewish West Bank settlements and the strategic Jordan Valley according to U.S. President Donald Trump's Middle East **peace plan**, saying the move is **not off the table** and is **currently being discussed** and prepared by Washington officials.

Deliberations on the execution of the **plan should have been brought** before Knesset on **July 1** but were **put on the back burner ever since** after both Israel and the U.S. experienced major coronavirus **outbreaks**.

08.03.20

PM's upgraded plane suspended test flights over cost, amid pandemic economic crisis

08.03.20

PM's office halts test flights of Israeli 'Air Force 1' plane

Flight tests for the plane to be used by Israel's prime minister and president during their trips abroad **suspended** to avoid criticism **over cost of hundreds of millions** of dollars
Itay Blumenthal, Itamar Eichner | Updated: **08.03.20**, 14:15

The Prime Minister's Office has ordered to **ground** all **test flight** of the **newly acquired plane** to be used by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his successors as well as the president, **until further notice**.

The plane currently being renovated by Israel Aerospace Industries near the Ben Gurion Airport has come under public criticism for its increasing cost.

The **Israeli "Air Force 1"** is a **Boeing 767** airplane that **arrived** in Israel in **2016**. Since then, the aircraft has been **fitted** with numerous **upgrades**, such as **advanced communications and defense systems**.

After years of delays, the plane's **first test flight** was **conducted** last **November**, and the **last test flight** took place on **February 10**.

According to a source, the **decision to halt work** on the plane **and cease** any upcoming **test flights** came due to the coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis which effected millions of citizens across Israel.

The decision was made in order to avoid additional criticism of the project, which has **already cost hundreds of millions of dollars**.

Sources in the Prime Minister's Office said in response that they are currently **focused on the fight against the coronavirus**.

Israel Aerospace Industries refused to respond claiming privacy concerns.

08.06.20

Beirut's accidental cargo: how an unscheduled port visit led to disaster

08.06.20

Beirut's accidental cargo: how an unscheduled port visit led to disaster

Captain of the Russian ship transporting ammonium nitrate says 'cargo was highly explosive and of a very high concentration,' which is why kept on board for so long, before being stored inside the port

Reuters| Updated: 08.06.20 , 21:29

The chemicals that went up in flames in Beirut's deadliest peace-time explosion arrived in the Lebanese capital seven years ago on a leaky Russian-leased cargo ship that, according to its captain, should never have stopped there.

"They were being greedy," said Boris Prokoshev, who was captain of the Rhosus in 2013 when he says the owner told him to make an unscheduled stop in Lebanon to pick up extra cargo.

Prokoshev said the ship was carrying 2,750 tonnes of a highly combustible chemical from Georgia to Mozambique when the order came to divert to Beirut on its way through the Mediterranean.

The crew was asked to load some heavy road equipment and take it to Jordan's Port of Aqaba before resuming their journey onto Africa, where the ammonium nitrate was to be delivered to an explosives manufacturer.

Advertisement

But the ship was never to leave Beirut, having tried and failed to safely load the additional cargo before becoming embroiled in a lengthy legal dispute over port fees.

"It was impossible," Prokoshev, 70, told Reuters of the operation to try and load the extra cargo. "It could have ruined the whole ship and I said no," he said by 'phone from his home in the Russian resort town of Sochi on the Black Sea coast.

The captain and lawyers acting for some creditors accused the ship's owner of abandoning the vessel and succeeded in having it arrested. Months later, for safety reasons, the ammonium nitrate was unloaded and put in a dock warehouse.

On Tuesday, that stockpile caught fire and exploded not far from a built-up residential area of the city. The huge blast killed 145 people, injured 5,000, flattened buildings and made more than a quarter of a million people homeless.

The ship might have succeeded in leaving Beirut, had it managed to load the additional cargo.

The crew had stacked the equipment, including excavators and road-rollers, on top of the doors to the cargo hold which held the ammonium nitrate below, according to the ship's Ukrainian boatswain, Boris Musinchak. But the hold doors buckled.

"The ship was old and the cover of the hold bent," Musinchak said by 'phone. "We decided not to take risks."

The captain and three crew spent 11 months on the ship while the legal dispute dragged on, without wages and with only limited supplies of food. Once they left, the ammonium nitrate was unloaded.

"The cargo was highly explosive. That's why it was kept on board when we were there ... That ammonium nitrate had a very high concentration," Prokoshev said.

Prokoshev identified the ship's owner as Russian businessman Igor Grechushkin.

Attempts to contact Grechushkin were unsuccessful.

The ammonium nitrate was sold by Georgian fertilizer maker Rustavi Azot LLC, and was to be delivered to a Mozambique explosives maker, Fabrica de Explosivos.

A senior representative for Fabrica de Explosivos did not immediately respond when sent a request for comment on LinkedIn.

Levan Burdiladze, the Rustavi Azot plant director, told Reuters that his company had only operated the chemical factory for the last three years and so he could not confirm whether the ammonium nitrate was produced there.

He called the decision to store the material in Beirut port a "gross violation of safe storage measures, considering that ammonium nitrate loses its useful properties in six months."

Initial Lebanese investigations into what happened have pointed to inaction and negligence in the handling of the potentially dangerous chemical.

Lebanon's cabinet on Wednesday agreed to place all Beirut port officials who have overseen storage and security since 2014 under house arrest, ministerial sources said.

The head of Beirut port and the head of customs said that several letters were sent to the judiciary asking for the material be removed, but no action was taken.

Reuters could not immediately reach Lebanon's justice minister for comment. The Justice Ministry is closed for three days of national mourning.

According to Prokoshev, the ship had been leaking but was seaworthy when it sailed into Beirut in September 2013. However, he said Lebanese authorities paid little attention to the ammonium nitrate, which had been stacked in the hull in large sacks.

"I feel sorry for the people (killed or injured in the blast). But local authorities, the Lebanese, should be punished. They did not care about the cargo at all," he said.

The abandoned Rhosus sank where she was moored in Beirut harbour, according to a May, 2018 email from a lawyer to Prokoshev, which said it had gone down "recently".

First published: 21:22 , 08.06.20

08.05.20

Beirut port fire in warehouse 9 spread to 12, holding ammonium nitrate since 2013

08.05.20

Negligence cause of Beirut blast, initial investigation shows

Sources within Lebanon say inspectors warned six months ago that highly flammable and explosive substances could 'blow up all of Beirut' if not removed
Reuters| Published: 08.05.20 , 16:17

Initial investigations into the Beirut port blast indicate years of inaction and negligence over the storage of highly explosive material caused the explosion that killed more than 100 people, an official source familiar with the findings said.

The prime minister and presidency have said that 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate, used in fertilizers and bombs, had been stored for six years at the port without safety measures.

“It is negligence,” the official source told Reuters, adding that the issue on storing the material safely had come before several committees and judges and “nothing was done” to order the material be removed or disposed of.

The source said a fire had started at port warehouse 9 on Tuesday and spread to warehouse 12, where the ammonium nitrate was stored.

Another source close to a port employee said a team that inspected the material six months ago warned it could “blow up all of Beirut” if not removed.

Tuesday’s explosion was the most powerful ever suffered by Beirut, a city still scarred by civil war three decades ago and reeling from a deep financial crisis rooted in decades of corruption and economic mismanagement.

The head of Beirut port and the head of customs both said on Wednesday that several letters were sent to the judiciary asking for the dangerous material be removed, but no action was taken.

Port General Manager Hassan Koraytem told OTV the material had been put in a warehouse on a court order, adding that they knew then the material was dangerous but “not to this degree”.

“We requested that it be re-exported but that did not happen. We leave it to the experts and those concerned to determine why,” Badri Daher, director-general of Lebanese Customs, told broadcaster LBCI.

Two documents seen by Reuters showed Lebanese Customs had asked the judiciary in 2016 and 2017 to request that the “concerned maritime agency” re-export or approve the sale of the ammonium nitrate, which had been removed from cargo vessel Rhosus and deposited in warehouse 12, to ensure port safety.

One document cited similar requests in 2014 and 2015.

Former Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, whose father and also a former premier was killed in a large truck bomb attack in 2015 in the capital, called for a foreign role in investigating the blast that “once again killed the heart of Beirut”.

“We ask the government ... for a transparent judicial and security investigation without compromise, denial or circumventing the truth,” he said in a statement.

Shiparrested.com, an industry network dealing with legal cases, said in a 2015 report that the Rhosus, sailing under a Moldovan flag, docked in Beirut in September 2013 when it had technical problems while sailing from Georgia to Mozambique with 2,750 tonnes of ammonium nitrate.

It said that, upon inspection, the vessel was forbidden from sailing and shortly afterwards was abandoned by its owners, leading to various creditors coming forward with legal claims.

“Owing to the risks associated with retaining the ammonium nitrate on board the vessel, the port authorities discharged the cargo onto the port’s warehouses,” it added.

07.28.20

Lebanese leader blames Hezbollah for economy crisis, solution is for them to leave

07.28.20

Lebanese party leader blames Hezbollah, allies for crisis

Samir Geagea, head of Lebanese Forces Party, says infiltration attempt along into Israel proves Beirut 'has lost sovereignty over south'; warns political presence of Iran-backed terror group bars country from financial aid from other Arab nations

Associated Press| Published: 07.28.20 , 18:08

The leader of a major Christian group in Lebanon on Tuesday blamed the Hezbollah terror group and its local allies led by President Michel Aoun for the rapidly deteriorating economy and worsening relations with neighboring Arab countries, saying the only solution is for them to leave power.

Samir Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces Party, told The Associated Press that Monday's military activity along the border with Israel was a clear indication the current Lebanese government, which Hezbollah supports, doesn't have sovereignty in the south, where thousands of UN peacekeepers are based.

The IDF said it thwarted an infiltration attempt Monday by a Hezbollah cell, setting off one of the heaviest exchanges of fire along the volatile Israel-Lebanon frontier since a 2006 war between the bitter enemies.

Hezbollah denied its members were involved in any activity along the border while the Lebanese government commented only a day later.

"Yesterday's incident gives a clear idea about the state of sovereignty for the Lebanese state. Is that acceptable?" Geagea said in the telephone interview.

"Which Arab and foreign countries want to deal with a government that considers itself nonexistent at a time when there is a security danger along its border?"

Hezbollah and its allies of the Free Patriotic Movement of President Aoun control majority seats in parliament and are the main backers of the current government that took office earlier this year. Lebanese Prime Minister Hassan Diab replaced Western-backed

Saad Hariri who resigned in October, following nationwide protests against widespread corruption and mismanagement by Lebanon's rulers.

Since then, the government has struggled to contain the escalating crisis, made worse by the pandemic. The government defaulted on paying back its debt for the first time in March, and the past few months have seen the Lebanese currency lose more than 80% of its value.

The government has requested a bailout from the International Monetary Fund but negotiations with the lender that started in mid-May have stalled because of divisions within the Lebanese leadership. Oil-rich gulf nations as well as international donors are refusing to give Lebanon a hand before major reforms are carried out within state institutions.

Geagea, whose party has taken part in successive governments for the past decade and has 15 legislators in the 128-member parliament, said Lebanon received much assistance from Arab and Western countries in the past but all was wasted. Only a new, independent government would be able to win back the international community's confidence, he said. Geagea warned the alliance between Hezbollah and Aoun's party "has brought Lebanon to where it is and they will continue to do the same in the months to come."

"As long as they are in power we will continue in the crisis. It is a very simple and clear equation," Geagea said. "They are living on a different planet."

The state's strategic decisions are in Hezbollah's hands, leading to deteriorating Lebanon's relations with Arab states, he also said.

Geagea, whose party played a major role in Lebanon's 1975-90 civil war, said that once Hezbollah withdraws its fighters from Yemen, Syria and Iraq, and stops implementing Iran's policy, Arab states will most likely review relations with Lebanon.

08.05.20

Trump says generals feel Beirut blast was likely an 'attack'

08.05.20

Trump says generals feel Beirut blast was likely an 'attack'

POTUS told by generals explosion 'not some kind of a manufacturing explosion' and may have been caused by a bomb, contradicting official reports in Lebanon; Pentagon declines to comment

Associated Press| Published: 08.05.20, 08:24

U.S. President Donald Trump said U.S. military generals have told him that they "seem to feel" the massive explosion that rocked Beirut on Tuesday, killing at least 78 people, was a "terrible attack" likely caused by a bomb.

Trump was asked why he **called it an attack and not an accident**, especially since Lebanese officials say they have not determined the cause of the explosion. He told reporters at the White House: "It would seem like it based on the explosion. I met with some of our great generals and they just seem to feel that it was. This was not a - some kind of a manufacturing explosion type of an event... They seem to think it was an attack. It was a bomb of some kind, yes."

Trump offered condolences to the victims and said the United States stood ready to assist Lebanon. "It looks like a terrible attack," he said.

A Pentagon spokesman declined to comment on the matter Tuesday night, referring questions back to the White House.

The **explosion flattened much of a port and damaged buildings across the capital**, sending a giant mushroom cloud into the sky. In addition to those who died, more than 4,000 other people were injured, with bodies buried in the rubble, officials said.

The **cause** of the blast was **not immediately known**, but initial reports **suggested a fire** had **detonated a warehouse at the port**. Abbas Ibrahim, chief of Lebanese General Security, said it might have been caused by highly **explosive material** that was **confiscated from a ship some time ago** and **stored at the port**. Local television channel LBC said the material was **ammonium nitrate**.

Witnesses reported seeing a strange, **orange cloud-like** which **appears when toxic nitrogen dioxide gas is released after an explosion involving nitrates**.