

**Four months on from the blast, Lebanon is threatened by a silent tsunami. Lebanon's leaders must act**

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In late July, via video conference, I visited Lebanon virtually. I was struck by the huge potential of Lebanon's people, but also the great need for serious reform. Days later I watched with horror as the massive explosion ripped through Beirut's port killing and injuring so many, destroying vital infrastructure and homes. The devastated port now sits as a dark reminder of the importance of acting on warnings when we receive them, and the consequences of poor management and corruption.

We should always seek to prevent disasters. But sometimes this is not within our gift. We cannot, for example, control the weather and stop a hurricane, an earthquake or a tsunami. But we can invest in early warning systems, make plans to protect people, property and investments, ensure capabilities are in the right place and act on warnings when we receive them.

Lebanon now faces a growing threat, putting its people at risk. It is the direct consequence of a flawed economic model. As with the port explosion, this is a man-made problem which could have been prevented. The risk has been largely silent but is now accelerating and growing with every passing day. Emergencies are approaching in education and health care, as well as electricity. But the most pressing danger is the risk to food security: Lebanon is on the verge of not being able to feed itself.

In Lebanon there are now many worrying signs. A food security crisis often does not reveal itself until the worst of the damage is done. This is why this type of crisis is a silent tsunami. Lebanon is vulnerable because it imports an extraordinary amount of food, 85 percent of its domestic wheat consumption. On top of this are the continuous rises in basic goods prices, a 141 percent rise for food products by July compared with the same time last year.

Those living on the margins in Lebanon including, but not only, Syrian refugees, have seen a shocking rise in their vulnerability. Almost all Syrian refugees now live in extreme poverty and are unable to buy adequate food for their needs. Among the Lebanese, we are seeing people selling their possessions to buy food for their children, and long bread lines. The removal of subsidies is set to deteriorate the situation further. In late August, the United Nations predicted that over 50 percent of the population in Lebanon might be at risk of failing to access basic food needs by the end of 2020.

Lebanon needs meaningful reform and development support, but experience shows us this will take time. Progress will be hard won, particularly given the extraordinary global challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Time is not on our side. Humanitarian action is needed as a bridge to these solutions, to reduce suffering and blunt the worst impacts of the crisis here. The UK will continue to support the most vulnerable. But urgent action by the Lebanese government to protect people is vital.

I reiterate my call to the leaders of Lebanon to do what is needed and deliver reforms, putting Lebanon on a path to a sustainable, transparent, accountable and inclusive future. Planning for a crisis is not just a technical exercise, but ultimately a political choice. You must have a plan and be ready to implement it, for the sake of those most in need. The international community, and your people, are watching.

Lebanon's people, and all others who call Lebanon home, deserve better. The alternative will be horrific. The UK will continue to stand as a steadfast partner to the people of Lebanon. But Lebanon's leaders must act now.