

Exasperated by their leaders, Lebanese find hope in a dog named Flash



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On Wednesday night a Chilean rescue dog gave the Lebanese something they hadn't felt in a long time — hope. A team of Chilean rescuers were walking between the gravely damaged residential districts of Gemmayze and Mar Mikhael when Flash — trained to find bodies — gave a sign that there was a person inside. Detector equipment indicated that there was a small body still breathing and with a pulse.

The discovery was something of a miracle, given the fact that it had been nearly a month since a cataclysmic blast ripped through Beirut's port. It was later reported that 2,700 tons of ammonium nitrate had been stored in one of the warehouses for at least six years. No Lebanese leader has taken responsibility for the criminal mismanagement of the explosives, which were alarmingly stored in close proximity to residential areas.

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Subsequent protests from enraged citizens did not produce any real change as Lebanon's political elite have refused to budge from their seats. The Lebanese government did resign, as did former Prime Minister Saad Hariri in October, when anti-government protests first erupted.

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However, it was not enough to quell the anger on the streets, and the resignation was largely viewed as cosmetic — President Michael Aoun remained, and only a handful of parliamentarians have quit their posts. The Lebanese have little faith that the true culprits will be held responsible, due to what they view as a flawed and partisan justice system.

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The fact that this glimmer of hope did not come from Lebanon's leaders, but in fact a dog, was a sad irony not lost on most citizens. "When a dog (breed: Border Collie) does a better job than a whole government in #Lebanon," independent journalist Luna Safwan tweeted along with a picture of Flash. The post was widely shared across social media platforms.

Another social media user, IvanDebs, shared a caricature he drew of Flash standing heroically on top of rubble. The image was shared over 1,000 times.

According to ground reporting from various activists and journalists at the rescue scene, the Chilean team TOPOS came to Lebanon on their own dime. When they told bystanders that they needed a crane to continue their work, it was arranged — not by the government, but by activists who had gathered hoping to witness a miracle.

According to Sara El-Yafi, a Lebanese analyst and activist, the hugely popular Lebanese actress Nadine Labaki, who had gathered with bystanders at the scene, called her up asking for a favor. El-Yafi knew the husband of Lebanon's Defense Minister Zeina Akkar, and it was only then when a crane was dispatched to the scene. Protesters wondered why it had to take a call from a citizen to drive the government to some form of action.

Lebanese journalist Larissa Aoun tweeted a video she took the day after the explosion of the exact same collapsed building in the Mar Mikhael neighborhood. "People were asking local authorities for weeks to look under the rubble as there were bad smells. No one answered their calls," she wrote.

Since the blast on August 4, Lebanese have accused their government, not only of gross negligence and corruption, which they believe were the prime factors that led to the explosion, but also of doing nothing to rescue victims or clear the destruction. Instead, Lebanese citizens from all corners of the country flooded Beirut with brooms and trash bags, sweeping up shattered glass and assisting anyone in need.

"Indeed it is quite emblematic of the suffering of the Lebanese people," Karim Bitar, a political science professor in Lebanon and France, told Al Arabiya English.

“It shows the juxtaposition of the apathy of the Lebanese authorities and the extraordinary determination of the Lebanese civil society that went the extra mile to help the Chilean rescue team.”

Bitar pointed out the bleakness of the situation in which “many Lebanese respect a dog, more so than their so-called representatives.”

Since Wednesday night, there has been nearly 24-hour news coverage from the rescue site, not only from television stations, but also Lebanese activists live streaming the event on their social media accounts. Thousands of viewers from around the world have been glued to their screens, hoping that the rescue workers’ tireless efforts will produce a live human being.

Observers believe there to be two children trapped under the rubble. “The presumption is that the two children may be the flower sellers who used to sit on the stairs next to Pizzanini (a nearby restaurant). This would explain why their disappearance was not reported,” El-Yafi wrote on her Instagram account. “Neglected by society. Neglected by the government. Neglected by family.”

On Saturday, nearly three days since the heartbeats were first detected, there was renewed hope for a miracle. “More hope today than there was yesterday,” Chilean rescuer Walter Monos tells us after respirations — 18 beats per minute detected, as on the first day. This time they are investigating the destroyed staircase between the building in question and Pizzanini,” Tamara Qiblawia, a CNN International journalist reported.

Regardless if the workers are able to get to the breathing person in time, the entire episode is emblematic of the agony of the people. The Lebanese have not only been protesting to uproot what they view as a corrupt elite from power since October, but are facing an unprecedented economic crisis.

Lebanon’s currency, the lira, began losing value in October 2019, and last week inflation soared past 100 percent to levels last seen after the country’s civil war. This means the cost of basic materials needed to rebuild homes and businesses cannot be met by thousands of people who were struggling to make ends meet even before the explosion.

On top of that, a surge in coronavirus cases has exacerbated the situation with up to 600 daily cases, as opposed to the dozens of daily cases reported before August. Most people cannot afford the test which costs \$100.

Lebanese journalist Medea Azzouri captured the sentiment of so many of her compatriots when she wrote on Instagram: “This person under the rubble, it’s us, the Lebanese people, agonizing, fighting for our lives and hooked on the slightest glimmer of hope.”