



TEL AVIV: The city hall in the Israeli coastal city of Tel Aviv is lit up in the colors of the Lebanese national flag in solidarity - a day after a devastating blast at the port of Lebanon's capital, in Israel's latest gesture towards a country with which it is technically at war. — AFP

Israel square bathed in Lebanese colors

A rare show of support over Beirut blast

TEL AVIV: The red, white and cedar green of the Lebanese flag were lit up over a Tel Aviv square on Wednesday in a rare show of Israeli solidarity with Beirut as it reels from a devastating explosion. Israel has been in a technical state of war with Lebanon for generations, and it deems the country's armed Shi'ite Muslim group Hezbollah, backed by Iran, the biggest threat across its northern border. Israel and Hezbollah fought a month-long war in 2006 and have traded fire again in recent weeks.

But, arguing that "humanity comes before any conflict", Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai ordered City Hall on Rabin Square, named for the late Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, to be illuminated with the Lebanese flag on Wednesday evening. "Our hearts are with the Lebanese people following this terrible tragedy," Huldai wrote on Twitter. At nightfall, windows on the 13-storey building's facade were filled with light in the design of Lebanon's flag: two horizontal red stripes enveloping a wider

band of white, with a large green cedar tree - Lebanon's national symbol - at the centre.

The decision drew criticism from some Israelis, including cabinet minister Rafael Peretz, who on Twitter likened it to "raising (an) enemy state's flag in the heart of Tel Aviv". Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel had offered aid to Lebanon after the massive warehouse explosion in the port district of the capital Beirut on Tuesday that killed at least 135 people and injured over 5,000.

Lebanon has not responded to the overture, according to an Israeli defense official, who suggested that Israel with UN support could "set up and operate field hospitals on our side of the border and admit casualties from Lebanon". In the Israeli-occupied West Bank, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas declared Wednesday a day of mourning and ordered Palestinian flags in the territory lowered to half mast in solidarity with Lebanon.—Reuters

The political fallout from Lebanon blast

BEIRUT: The colossal explosion that devastated Beirut's port and gutted entire neighborhoods of the Lebanese capital deals a fresh blow to an already fragile and deeply unpopular government. Lebanon's ruling elite was already under enormous pressure from a protest movement that rejects it as inept, corrupt and beholden to the country's myriad sectarian groups rather than the national interest. With public anger now boiling over the epic destruction caused by a disaster blamed on official negligence, in a country choking from its worst ever economic crisis, what will be the political impact?

On the government

Prime Minister Hassan Diab's government, billed

as technocratic line-up when it was launched in January, is seen as subservient to the party of President Michel Aoun and his Hezbollah allies. In weeks of talks, the cabinet has failed to reach a deal with the International Monetary Fund on a rescue package for Lebanon, which defaulted on its debt earlier this year. Battling runaway inflation, mass unemployment and rising poverty, the government is already fraying at the edges. This week Nassif Hitti resigned as foreign minister to protest a lack of willingness to tackle much-needed reforms, warning that Lebanon risked becoming a "failed state".

Maha Yahya, director of the Carnegie Middle East Center, argued that "in any other country, the government would resign" after such deadly blasts. "Irrespective of how this explosion came to happen there is absolute criminal neglect." Security officials told AFP that huge quantities of highly explosive ammonium nitrate had been stored for years in a rundown warehouse and that the hazard was known to the authorities. "The catastrophe, while exceptionally severe, is the result of business as usual in Lebanon," Faysal Itani, a deputy director at the Center for Global Policy, wrote in The New York

Times. "There is a pervasive culture of negligence, petty corruption and blame-shifting endemic to the Lebanese bureaucracy, all overseen by a political class defined by its incompetence and contempt for the public good." Nonetheless, in the context of extreme geopolitical polarisation in the region, especially between arch foes the United States and Iran, the government's sponsors might seek to preserve it at all costs. "Despite popular anger... a resignation still seems unlikely just now because there is no clear alternative," said Karim Bitar, a professor of international relations in Paris and Beirut.

On the protest camp

An unprecedented nationwide and cross-sectarian protest movement that erupted on October 17 had looked at one stage like it could topple the hereditary ruling elite. The euphoria faded however as change failed to materialize and the combination of economic hardship and the coronavirus pandemic left the popular revolution in tatters.

Bitar predicted that Tuesday's tragedy would give the protest camp "a second wind". "The Lebanese will be more determined than ever to

make a political class which is corrupt to the bone accountable," he said. But Yahya argued that many among the protest camp could also see the port blast as the last straw that convinces them to leave the country for good, joining Lebanon's massive diaspora. The government announced a two-week state of emergency with immediate effect on Wednesday, which could also foil any plans for mass protests in the short term.

On Hezbollah

The Tehran-backed movement, the dominant political player in Lebanon, appealed for unity and its leader Hassan Nasrallah has postponed a televised address initially slated for Wednesday evening. "They will also be held accountable because they are part and parcel of the governing system," said Yahya. Hezbollah's influence on the running of the port is known to the public and will reflect badly on the organization, she said. Strangled by US sanctions, the Shiite movement is also bracing for the upcoming verdict in the trial over the 2005 assassination of former prime minister Rafic Hariri.—AFP