

SUPPRESSING PROTESTS: FRENCH LESS LETHAL WEAPONS USED IN LEBANON

INTRODUCTION

On 17 October 2019, [mass protests](#) broke out across Lebanon on an unprecedented scale. For months, tens of thousands of peaceful protesters assembled in cities, towns and villages across the country, expressing long-standing grievances to the government related to rising prices, high unemployment, dire public services, and rampant and systemic corruption.

Protests continued until March 2020, when fear of COVID-19 and fatigue due to the economic crisis brought them to a halt. But they resumed on 8 August, days after an explosion of 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate tore through Beirut leaving widespread destruction and over 190 dead.

Throughout the months of the protest movement, Lebanese security forces repeatedly used dangerous and unlawful force to attempt to control protests. At the 8 August protest the Lebanese military and security forces responded by shooting at unarmed [protesters](#), including with live ammunition. On a number of occasions documented by Amnesty International the use of force was unnecessary, unprovoked and designed to disperse a peaceful protest.

Even on the occasions where some limited use of force may have been justifiable, the manner in which security forces responded to, for example, stone-throwing, the way in which less lethal weapons were used was unlawful. They fired rubber bullets at chest height into crowds, indicating a shoot to harm policy, used massive quantities of tear gas, and beat protesters with batons as they fled.

Over 1,000 protesters have been rushed to hospitals with different injuries including to their eyes, heads, necks and chests, while hundreds were arrested and unlawfully detained, with most released after a few days. Over the following months, the Lebanese authorities [investigated](#) over 70 activists involved with the protest movement on criminal charges in an attempt to intimidate them into silence.

Lebanese authorities bear primary responsibility for the human rights violations committed by its security forces; but France, as a key supplier of a wide range of policing equipment, has helped fuel these abuses through its transfers. While Lebanese security forces have repeatedly failed to operate within international standards on use of force, lax export controls have placed French equipment in the hands of serial human rights violators.

Amnesty International documented copious visual evidence of Lebanese security forces using French equipment abusively against demonstrators, including instances of excessive use of tear gas and security forces firing French-made canisters towards protesters at a low-angle trajectory – risking serious injury or death. The arms identified in the video set analysed include grenade launchers, vehicle-mounted weapons and instances of munitions use, as well as the use of armoured vehicles.

Amnesty International’s Crisis Evidence Lab and [Digital Verification Corps based at UC, Berkeley Human Rights Center](#) collected, verified and analysed 101 videos of protests between 2015 and 2020, identifying and classifying French-made weapons used in the protests. Amnesty International was present on the ground in Beirut monitoring security forces’ use of force at protests from October 2019 to February 2020. The organization interviewed over 90 protesters as injured victims or eyewitnesses and reviewed medical reports.

TEAR GAS: “The grenade exploded on my head”

Amnesty International documented the misuse of tear gas at protests between October 2019 and August 2020, as well as in [August 2015](#), showing a pattern of unlawful use. This has been identified in residential areas, affecting mostly peaceful participants and bystanders. Amnesty International’s analysis shows French-produced tear gas equipment being used in these instances – including SAE Alsetex and Nobel Sécurité canisters and SAE Alsetex grenade launchers and vehicle-mounted weapons.

In many instances, the purpose of the tear gas use was clearly to disperse a largely peaceful protest, thus violating the right to freedom of peaceful assembly. In other instances, Amnesty International documented security forces firing tear gas canisters directly at protesters – an unlawful and extremely dangerous practice that has resulted in many deaths in other parts of the world. In Lebanon, this has led to serious head and upper-body injuries.

14 DECEMBER 2019:

On Saturday, 14 December 2019, at around 6 pm local time in Beirut, peaceful protesters - including women, men, older people and children – gathered outside

the parliament. Protesters at the front told Amnesty International that at around 7 pm, without any provocation, large numbers of riot police, alongside men in civilian clothes, barged through the peaceful crowd and started chasing protesters and beating them with batons. Within minutes, the police began firing successive rounds of tear gas canisters. Amnesty International staff observed how dozens of people were injured as a result of the beatings and many suffered severe effects of tear gas inhalation. Having dispersed, protesters were chased by police almost two kilometres along the highway.

One protester, Sara, told the organization:

“The tear gas canisters were being fired one after another. At first, four at a time, and then they became like fireworks as when we were kids. People were throwing up, others saying ‘drink water, smell onions [or] vinegar’; no one knew what was happening.”

Another activist described to Amnesty International how he woke up the next day still coughing because of the effects of the tear gas. He said: “The amount of tear gas was ridiculous. It was like someone shooting with a machine gun. Tear gas canisters were falling one after the other.”

Amnesty International staff witnessed and verified through video evidence from the 14 December 2019 protest that excessive quantities of tear gas was deployed into crowds of protesters from SAE Alsetex Land Cougar 12 vehicle-mounted launchers - despite no apparent immediate threat from protestors. Other SAE Alsetex launchers and tear gas canisters are also identified as having been used against protesters on this day.

18 JANUARY 2020:

The weekend of 18-19 January 2020 was [one of the most violent weekends](#) of Lebanon’s protests. At least 409 protesters were injured in clashes with security forces in Beirut. The shoot-to-harm use of force by security forces left protesters with serious injuries to the cranium, face, chin and mouth.

Carine was taking part in a protest in Riad El Solh on Saturday, 18 January. At around 6 pm, riot police deployed tear gas. She said protesters were peaceful and did not provoke the security forces.

“We were protesting and chanting at Riad El Solh. As I was telling my friends that we should leave because we couldn’t breathe anymore, a tear gas grenade hit me on the head. I lost consciousness immediately. The grenade exploded on my head. My head is injured, and my nose is broken.”

Amnesty International verified video evidence of a variety of SAE Alsetex tear gas

equipment used on this day, with videos showing tear gas canisters being launched from a distance at protesters from SAE Alsetex Land Cougar 12 vehicle mounted launchers. Other videos show large amounts of tear gas deployed continuously after protesters had been pushed back.

8 AUGUST 2020:

On 8 August 2020, protesters [took to the streets](#) in Beirut following the massive explosion that ripped through the city on 4 August. Jad* was in the Azarieh district when he was struck by a tear gas canister, suffering a broken nose. He told Amnesty International: “As we were packing to leave, I was hit in the face above my right eye with a tear gas canister. My nose is broken and my whole face is swollen.”

Faten* was also in Azarieh when she was hit in her right shoulder with a tear gas canister. She told Amnesty International: “The whole area was clouded with tear gas. I couldn’t see the anti-riot police, but I saw more than 10 protesters around me suffocating and falling to the ground. Then I felt as if my arm fell off my body. I was hit with a tear gas canister in my right shoulder.”

Video evidence shows Lebanese security forces misusing a wide variety of French equipment on this day. Alongside SAE Alsetex Land Cougar 12 launchers, Cougar 56mm launchers, and Alsetex and Nobel Sécurité tear gas grenades, Amnesty International identified tear gas being deployed from Arquus Sherpa armoured personnel carriers.

RUBBER BULLETS: “I FELT A RED LASER LIGHT POINTING AT MY FACE AND THEN I WAS SHOT IN MY RIGHT EYE”

Amnesty International documented repeated targeting of peaceful protesters with rubber bullets, which in some instances were shot from close range and caused serious injuries. In January and August 2020, photos, videos, testimonies and medical records reviewed by Amnesty International showed that riot police were often shooting rubber bullets directly into the crowd at chest-level and that many of the protesters sustained upper body injuries, specifically in the eyes, face, neck, chest, upper arms and stomach. In some cases, police shot at unarmed protesters, some of whom were throwing stones, from close range, indicating that they were shooting to harm.

18-19 JANUARY 2020:

Michel Razzouk, 47 years old, told Amnesty International that riot police shot him at close range with rubber bullets and beat him on the night of 18 January.

“I felt something that hit me that took my breath away. I felt I was pounded down by a ton of weight and didn’t realize what was happening. One guy had shot me straight in the stomach; he was about four to five metres away. I’m not sure the other police officers even realized that he had shot me, and they started beating me up. I felt paralyzed and couldn’t move; that’s when I realized something was wrong. They were telling me, ‘stand up, stand up’ but I couldn’t.”

Another protester, Jean George Prince, was wounded by a rubber bullet on 18 January. He told Amnesty International that he was protesting peacefully, near Le Grey Hotel, when he was hit in the face by a rubber bullet, resulting in a deep cut on his lower lip that required reconstructive surgery.

“We were peaceful protesters, forming a line in front of the riot police. We weren’t moving towards them. They were only four or five meters away... I saw one of them shooting and pointing directly at the people”, he told the organization.

A female protester who did not want to be named told Amnesty International that she was participating in protests on 19 January near Nejmeh square when she saw a member of the riot police aiming directly at her from close range. As she was trying to escape, a rubber bullet injured her ear.

“I was standing there. No one else was beside me. There were no other protesters engaging in violence nor was there any immediate danger. I saw him [the riot police] come out from behind a wall. He looked at me in the eye and he pointed his gun at me... A rubber bullet passed right by my left ear. [It] tore my ear and I couldn’t hear with it... The left side of my face is swollen too.”

Video evidence from 18 January 2019 shows shotguns being fired at protesters, sometimes from close range, and SAPL rubber bullet cartridges discovered on the ground.

8 AUGUST 2020

Security forces shot Amjad* in the neck with a rubber bullet. It hit a vein, and he suffered significant blood loss before being taken to Rizk Hospital. He said: “We were in Riad Al-Solh Street. I saw the riot police and the army shooting directly at the protesters from a close range. They were around 12 metres away from us, and then I felt blood pouring from my neck. I pressed on the wound with my fingers and walked in the direction of the Red Cross ambulance to get help. I then fainted and the people there helped me.”

According to medics, another protester called Hassan* was shot in the eye with a rubber bullet.

He said: “I was next to Le Gray Hotel around 7:30 p.m. Riot police were few metres away. I felt a red laser light pointing at my face and then I was shot in my right eye. I rushed to the civil defence medics who admitted me to the hospital.”

Lebanese security forces use of rubber bullets is clearly abusive and falls well short of international standards on the use of force. Kinetic impact projectiles must not be fired randomly at a crowd but must be aimed exclusively at persons who are engaged in violence against persons, and only when other means have failed to stop the violence. They should be aimed at the lower part of the body to minimize the risk of serious injury. They should never be used for skip fire, bounce off the ground to hit their targets.

LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY

In December 2020, Amnesty International spoke to three lawyers representing a group of protesters who had been subjected to unlawful force - and at times torture or other ill-treatment - by military and security forces. Between October 2019 and October 2020, these lawyers filed at least 40 complaints before the Public Prosecutor on behalf of injured protesters. According to these lawyers, a number of these cases were simply not investigated; in other cases where the prosecutor did open an investigation, it was either closed or remained pending without an effective investigation.

Given this lack of action, Lebanese security forces are operating in a climate of impunity, using abusive methods and tactics without effective oversight, investigation or sanction. Weapons, including those made in France, are not only being used unlawfully, but incidents involving their misuse are not being investigated by judicial authorities, greatly increasing the risk of future misuse for serious human rights violations.

FRENCH EQUIPMENT USED IN CRACKDOWN ON PROTESTS

Amnesty International’s Crisis Evidence Lab and Digital Verification Corps discovered, verified and analyzed videos of protests in Beirut between 22 August 2015 and 8 October 2020. These videos show that the Lebanese army and security forces have deployed a wide range of French equipment to quell the protests inappropriately. These include vehicle-mounted launchers (Alsetex Land Cougar 12); tear gas grenades (Nobel Sécurité MP7, Alsetex CM4 and CM6); rubber bullets (SAPL Gomm-Cogne cartridges); grenade launchers (Alsetex Chouka and Cougar); and Arquus Sherpa armoured personnel carriers. This equipment appears repeatedly in footage of protests featuring multiple incidents of unlawful use of force.

Some of this equipment, such as grenade launchers and armoured vehicles, is exported as “military equipment”; other equipment, such as tear gas grenades and rubber bullets, is exported as “civilian equipment”.

In relation to “military equipment”, under the Arms Trade Treaty or the EU Common Position on Arms Exports – both of which are legally binding -- France must carry out a rigorous risk assessment and must not export equipment which has a substantial risk of being used to commit or facilitate serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. In contrast, “civilian equipment” is not well controlled under French export regulations. However, under international law, France has extraterritorial obligations to block the provision of material aid, such as law enforcement equipment, to a state that is known to use such equipment to commit serious human rights violations.

Lack of transparency and gaps in implementation of existing law and regulations has meant that Lebanese security forces have repeatedly used French equipment with no accountability for acts which constitute serious violations of human rights, including torture and other ill-treatment. These violations have resulted in serious injury to peaceful protesters. Yet not one police officer has been brought to justice for violations related to the policing of public assembly.

Given the clear and ongoing patterns of abuse committed by the Lebanese security forces, France – and all other supplier states - must immediately cease supplying all law enforcement equipment which risks being used to commit or facilitate serious human rights violations. This includes armoured vehicles, chemical irritants, such as tear gas and pepper spray, and kinetic impact projectiles, such as rubber bullets, and related launchers. The French authorities should inform Lebanese security forces that they can only resume exports once they demonstrate that such equipment is used in line with international law and standards on the use of force, there is full accountability for past abuses and adequate remedy for victims of abuse.

France has a particular responsibility towards Lebanon in light of its history and the recent statements by President Emmanuel Macron. On 6 August 2020, two days after the explosion that tore through Beirut, Macron visited Beirut, declaring political and potential economic support to Lebanon. That support should extend to the promotion of accountability and rule of law in Lebanon. France must respect its international commitments on transfers of arms and policing equipment and respect for international human rights law to protect the civilian population, regardless of its strategic interests in Lebanon.

French authorities must strengthen controls to ensure that both military and civilian goods used in law enforcement are exported responsibly. There needs to be far greater transparency about the volume, nature and destination of sales of arms and security equipment, and parliamentary oversight of prospective export decisions. Only then can France avoid providing potential human rights violators with French-made policing equipment, and truly live up to its oft-stated ideals on human rights.

