

**Statement by H.E. Professor Hassan Diab  
President of the Council of Ministers of Lebanon  
On the Occasion of the 31st Special Session  
Of the UN General Assembly  
In Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic**

**December 3, 2020**

Distinguished Heads of States and Governments,  
H.E. The President of The United Nations General Assembly,  
H.E. The Secretary General of The United Nations,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me at the outset to express my deep appreciation to the Member States for their decision to convene a special session devoted to the Covid-19 pandemic under agenda item 128, entitled “strengthening of the United Nations System”. At this critical time, I participate in today’s conference with mixed feelings, heartened on one hand that the International Community is stepping up its global response to Covid-19 yet saddened to see that the pandemic has claimed the lives of more than 1.3 million persons and stalled the world economy.

Lebanon faced many challenges preparing for the emerging pandemic: The Covid-19 outbreak hit at a difficult time whereby the country was grappling with unprecedented existential and concurrent socio-economic and financial crises, leading to a further worsening of its dire conditions. In addition, the country is densely populated, with 6.9 million residents—87.2% of whom live in urban areas—including 2 million displaced persons and refugees and 500 000 migrant workers, all within 10 452 km<sup>2</sup> with a population density of 667/Km<sup>2</sup>

A Ministerial Crisis Cell was established to oversee the COVID-19 national preparedness and response and take the necessary measures to contain its spread. We initiated a “whole government response” through a public-private partnership that was centered around early aggressive containment to allow for building capacity to respond to COVID-19 cases.

The Lebanese health care sector is fragmented with hospitals of varying capabilities, 84% of which are private and mainly concentrated in large cities. The government timely and aggressive measures of closing sectors and going into a nationwide lockdown with only few cases reported has reached a Government Response Stringency Index of 85 at its peak. During the early days of the first wave, a single public hospital was designated as a treatment site, after securing the needed resources in partnership with WHO. This allowed the other hospitals time to build capacity to receive patients. Additionally, this approach limited the exposure of unprepared hospitals, which were sources of community clusters in the initial weeks and proved its effectiveness in keeping Lebanon in containment phase and among the first 15 countries that crushed the first wave of the virus. However, after the unfortunate Beirut port blast on August 4 that resulted in more than 6000 injured, Lebanon started experiencing alarming exponential growth in number of cases and the inability of the healthcare system to handle this growth especially that the blast resulted in destroying 3 major hospitals in Beirut. Consequently, the government resorted to a second nationwide lockdown on November 14 by a nationwide curfew from 5pm to 5am, leaving essential businesses operating. As at November 29, Lebanon recorded around 127 000 Covid-19 cases and 1004 deaths.

The socioeconomic impact of covid19 resulting from the lockdowns is massive in a country that is facing its worse economic collapse since its independence with an overall poverty prevalence in 2020 at 60% of its population of which 23% are in extreme poverty (food poverty) and 60% of its workforce are within informal arrangements. Covid19 presents a crisis within a crisis to the Lebanese public who are forced into making the difficult choice between: dying of corona virus or dying out of poverty. The government has put together a modest economic package to try to offset the impact of the new

shock on the population. However, this package only represents 1% of our GDP and remains well below what other countries are spending to alleviate the covid19 impact on its socioeconomic environment. That underlines the extreme necessity of international assistance to reinforce the social safety net in Lebanon. These alarming indicators describe the gravity of the situation which was further aggravated by the calamitous Beirut port blast on August 4, 2020. It was the day when approximately 300 000 of the city's residents lost their homes, 204 persons died and more than 6500 were injured. Scores of schools, hospitals, healthcare facilities were partially or completely destroyed while the hospitals and medical centers, which remained operational, were overwhelmed by patients seeking care for injuries sustained in the blast and for Covid-19 infections.

Indeed, due to the rise in Covid-19 cases, many hospitals are running short of ICU beds and experiencing shortages in medical supplies and in vital medical equipment. Medical personnel are overstretched, particularly in view of the unusual level of emigration of doctors and nurses, in addition to their exposure to infection.

More than any time in its history, Lebanon finds itself with extremely limited international support. While other countries received emergency International Monetary Fund (IMF) lines for covid19 response, Lebanon, being in a debt moratorium, didn't have access. External financing has been slow in coming and in very limited amounts.

Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has derailed and further delayed our efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda for sustainable Development.

To conclude, I wish to extend my gratitude to the United Nations, to The International Organizations and Donors who help Lebanon in its fight against the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the global fight is not

over yet as the entire world is experiencing a resurgence in cases. It is my firm belief that the victory against a “common enemy”, as depicted by the United Nations Secretary General, depends on our solidarity, cooperation and concerted efforts. Therefore, Lebanon welcomes a comprehensive, inclusive, multidimensional and people-centered response under the diligent care of the United Nations to tackle the spread of the pandemic and address its various fallouts. I sincerely hope that a special consideration would be given to developing countries including Lebanon, many of whom face the dire prospect of economic and social meltdown as well as deep and debilitating recessions.

Thank you.