

TRUTH LOST IN HUNT FOR PM'S KILLERS

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The Beirut murder inquiry is descending into farce, writes Rania Abouzeid

THE white banners scream "We want the truth" in large black lettering wrapped around the base of Martyr's Monument in the square across the street from former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri's gravesite.

The message is everywhere – on billboards, graffiti, and affixed to the blue ribbons many Lebanese are wearing that symbolize their demand to know who engineered the Feb. 14 attack that killed the billionaire politician and more than a dozen others.

But as a seething public presses for answers, scandals over the contamination of the crime scene, the discovery of bodies weeks later, and the uncooperativeness of officials have further dampened the confidence of many in authorities who have not solved a string of assassinations since the 1975-90 civil war.

Although Lebanon has pledged to work with a United Nations fact-finding team compiling a report for the Security Council on the "circumstances, causes and consequences" of the explosion along Beirut's seafront, it has refused to allow the commission to control the probe, much to the ire of Hariri's family, the anti-government opposition, the United States and France.

Interior Minister Suleiman Franjeh has insisted that the members of the team, headed by senior Irish police officer Peter Fitzgerald, are "not investigators, but are here to give their opinion."

Many Lebanese accuse Damascus and the pro-Syrian authorities in Beirut of orchestrating the attack and fear a domestic probe will lead nowhere.

“We are living in a country where our phones are tapped and everything is monitored. That’s why we can’t believe that someone could plan such an attack without Syrian and Lebanese secret services at least knowing about it,” said Gebran Tueni, publisher of the influential Beirut daily An-Nahar and an outspoken member of the opposition.

Close to a month after the crime, investigators remain tightlipped about how the security-savvy billionaire construction magnate was killed in broad daylight along a seaside boulevard full of luxury hotels.

“There is pandemonium within the investigation team,” an officer in the Lebanese Army with extensive knowledge of explosives said on condition of anonymity.

“They are unable to agree on the details; one of them told me the explosive was C4, another said that there was still little evidence to support that,” said the ordnance expert, who is not part of the investigation but has access to those who are.

“They are afraid of making definitive statements which they may have to retract later, for fear of being accused of covering something up.”

Questions have been raised about why the charred, twisted wrecks of Hariri’s six-car motorcade were taken to a nearby army base on the orders of military intelligence just hours after the attack.

According to the ordnance expert, the crucial evidence should have remained in situ in the interests of accurately reconstructing the crime, especially given that the other burnt-out hulls of cars still litter the street opposite the blackened façade of the 6-storey St. George Hotel, which bore the brunt of the blast.

The discovery of the body of a Syrian laborer under the wreckage of a car eight days after the attack and the subsequent unearthing of Mohammed Abdel-Hamid Ghalayini's corpse after 17 days has also not helped convince a suspicious public that the authorities are undertaking a thorough investigation.

Ghalayini's two daughters had frantically petitioned the authorities to search for their 53-year-old father, who went missing while he was jogging along the seaside boulevard, but were repeatedly ignored.

They eventually forced their way through the security cordon around the site following a scuffle and found their father just 5 minutes later, under 10 centimeters of rubble a few meters from the site of the massive crater caused by the blast.

"For weeks they did nothing," Ghalayini's eldest daughter, 26-year-old Lama told journalists moments later. "They kept telling us that cats were finding feet and hands, and today the flies helped find my father. Do we have to count on cats and flies? What is the state doing? ... The animals have more compassion than our government."

The Ghalayini case is indicative of the government's "carelessness," according to Mohammed Qabbani, a member of Hariri's parliamentary bloc. "If there was a dead cat after three or four days you could smell it, what about a person?" he said.

The Internal Security Forces have said that the delay in finding the bodies was due to measures taken "to keep the crime scene intact for international experts."

The site, however, was not actually cordoned off until two days after the Valentine's Day explosion.

"Tourists were walking around the bomb site the day after Hariri was killed," An-Nahar's Tueni said. "So what's this talk about preserving evidence?"

“Whether it is because of incompetence, stupidity, conspiracy or something else, the bottom line is we need an independent international probe,” he added. “All we want is the truth.”