

# Foundation: \$250 million lawsuit filed over Beirut blast

By Bassem Mroue | AP

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BEIRUT — Families of some of the victims of Beirut’s deadly port blast have filed a \$250 million lawsuit against an American-Norwegian firm suspected of involvement in bringing the explosive material to the port, a Swiss foundation announced Wednesday.

Accountability Now, which says its mission is to support Lebanese civil society efforts to put an end to the impunity of the country’s leaders, said the lawsuit was filed Monday. There are nine plaintiffs who are either Americans or relatives of an American, the group said.

The move comes as a domestic investigation in Lebanon has been stalled since December, following legal challenges brought by officials wanted for questioning against the investigative judge working on the case.

Hundreds of tons of ammonium nitrate, a highly explosive material used in fertilizers that had been improperly stored in the port for years, exploded on Aug. 4, 2020 killing nearly 220 people, injuring over 6,000 others and causing damage worth billions of dollars.

The Lebanese probe shows that most government officials knew of the dangerous material stored at the port. The blast worsened the country’s economic meltdown rooted in decades of corruption and mismanagement that began a year earlier.

Accountability Now said the \$250 million lawsuit filed in Texas names U.S.-Norwegian geophysical services group TGS, which owns the British firm Spectrum Geo, saying it had entered into a series of “highly profitable but suspicious contracts with the Ministry of Energy in Lebanon.”

It added that in 2012, Spectrum chartered the Moldavian flagged vessel Rhosus to come to Beirut while carrying 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate on board.

“This claim will force TGS to disclose Spectrum’s communications with various third parties who are all relevant to the investigations in Lebanon,” said Zena Wakim, a lawyer for Accountability Now who assisted the plaintiffs.

A message left with TGS on its website Wednesday seeking comment was not immediately returned.

Wakim said the domestic investigation is currently stalled by obstruction and the additional evidence “we could get through this case will help the judiciary in Lebanon and outside of Lebanon to assign individual responsibilities and hence hold the perpetrators accountable.”

Sarah Copland, whose son Isaac was the youngest victim of the blast that destroyed the port and damaged entire Beirut neighborhoods, tweeted that “in a step forward in the pursuit of justice for the #beirutblast a lawsuit has been filed in the US against the company that chartered the ship that brought” the material to Beirut.

Copland, an Australian citizen, said her son, Isaac was a U.S. citizen, “so we have joined this lawsuit on his behalf, but also on behalf of all victims.”

Tarek Bitar, the Lebanese judge leading the investigation in Beirut into the blast, had charged four former senior government officials with intentional killing and negligence that led to the deaths of scores of people in the port explosion.

At least two former Cabinet ministers filed legal challenges against the judge forcing him to suspend his work since more than seven months.

Several officials have refused to be questioned amid calls by some groups, including the powerful Hezbollah, to have the judge removed, accusing him of bias.

“It’s partly because the victims are hopeless. They are not being heard. They have no recourses left in Lebanon. The judiciary is totally muzzled up,” Wakim said adding that the lawsuit is for all the victims of the blast.

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Associated Press writers Kareen Chehayeb and Lujain Jo contributed to this report.