

## Weekly Report – Lafarge Trial, Paris Criminal Court

*Hearings of former Syrian employees (28 November-5 December 2025)*

### **Introduction**

Over the past two weeks, the Paris Criminal Court has heard the testimonies of former Syrian employees of Lafarge Cement Syria (LCS). Their powerful accounts sharply contrasted with the defense’s attempts to reframe the facts and minimize responsibility, offering the Court an unfiltered insight into the dangers and pressures they endured. One of the prosecutors from the Anti-Terrorism Prosecutor’s Office (*Parquet National Anti-Terroriste, PNAT*) thanked them for providing “*a striking and radiant mirror of Syria, because, until now, that mirror has been distorted*” by the defense.

### **Life-threatening working conditions: “Why are we not treated like expats? Because I am Syrian, I deserve to die?” – A.**

Several plaintiffs explained that working for a large corporation like Lafarge led them to expect “*the best*”. As K., one of the 11 employees who filed the initial complaint against Lafarge back in 2016, put it: “*We simply expected decent safety conditions, to stay alive, and fair pay for our work*”. However, “*Lafarge’s goal was to keep the plant running and to make money at any cost.*”

To collect their wages, employees were forced to travel to Aleppo, 150 km from the factory, and go through the “*death alley*”, a zone exposed to regime sniper fire, causing between 10 to 15 deaths per day. Despite repeated warnings to local management, their concerns were dismissed. The company only agreed to pay Syrian employees directly at the factory after one employee was killed on the road to collect his salary.

Meanwhile, the plant director was running the factory from Damascus, and LCS French directors – defendants in the case – lived safely in Egypt or Jordan. One of them, Bruno Pecheux, acknowledged that non-Syrians had been evacuated from 2012 because “*the situation was unsafe*.” Only “*locals*” were asked to continue working. In fact, the security alert level for non-Syrians was quickly set to “red” – its maximum level – when the war started in 2012, but it remained “orange” for Syrians even as the region fell under the control of the Islamic State and until it attacked the factory in September 2014.

### **Fear of checkpoints and kidnappings: “I had to sell my own furniture to pay the ransom for my son’s release” – J.**

Fear saturates the plaintiffs’ testimonies : “*Fear lived inside us*”; “*I felt terror*”; “*Fear was everywhere*”; “*I was prepared to die at any moment*”; “*I feared torture and kidnappings*” to

cite only a few of their words. H., testifying via video call from Germany, described the deadly risks posed by ISIS checkpoints that the employees were forced to cross every day: *“the slightest word in response to a question could get us arrested”*. Kidnappings at checkpoints and arbitrary detentions by ISIS were frequent, and killings occurred.

J. specified that employees were specifically targeted because they worked for Lafarge, which exposed itself and its employees to major risks by paying armed and terrorist groups that were violently fighting each other for the control of the area. In tears, he recounted the kidnapping of his son: *“They took my son for a month [...] They tied explosives to his legs and said they would [...] blow him up.”* He explained that he did not implicate the company at the time to protect his colleagues from further kidnappings: *“I handled the negotiations and paid the ransom myself, to protect my colleagues. I even had to sell my furniture to pay for it”*. N. also recounted his own kidnapping in late 2012: *“Their leader questioned us [...] We were terrified to mention that we worked for Lafarge, afraid it would be used against us”* because Lafarge also paid protection money to the Kurds, enemies of ISIS.

Later, different armed groups also wanted to act in retaliation to Lafarge’s agreements with ISIS. *“We were exposed to danger, anyone who wanted to take revenge on Lafarge could have targeted us”* said A, a former employee now living in Europe who lost two brothers during the war – including one killed by ISIS. Employees had repeatedly informed Lafarge that the situation on the roads between the factory and Manbij – the city where they were all forced to live with their families even after ISIS took control of the town from January 2014 – was extremely dangerous: *“All of this was well-known to Lafarge”*. Earlier in the trial, we heard Christian Herrault’s – former Deputy CEO in charge of Syrian operations – asserting that the *“sharing of the pie with ISIS”* (the proportional tax imposed on cement sales) *“indirectly protected Syrian employees”*.

**Lafarge's opportunistic position: “We had no other choice: either starve to death or work!”**  
**– A.**

Former employees talked about the absence of any alternative job options and the pressure put on them by LCS: *“If you refuse to come tomorrow, we will hire 10 people to replace you”* they were told in response to their fears to commute to the factory through the armed groups’ checkpoints.

They explained that an absence meant dismissal *“without compensation, without anything”*. As a striking example, the day after J.’s home in Manbij was destroyed by an airstrike traumatizing and injuring him and his family, Lafarge still *“forced [him] to go to work under threat of dismissal”*, even though he – as well as several other plaintiffs – confirmed to the Court that it was absolutely possible for them to work remotely. As N. summarized, *“Lafarge*

*knew perfectly well that we were exploited because we had nowhere else to go, given how dire the economic situation in Syria was at the time”.*

These testimonies contradict the paternalistic narrative, advanced by Bruno Pescheux, that “employees wanted to come to work”, “were proud to show they could run the plant on their own, without ‘expats’” and that “no one was chained to their workstation”, a position that N. ironically described as the “Lafarge pretext”.

**A “foreseeable” attack and a chaotic, “escape” from the plant: “We were hostages living on borrowed time” – N.**

Syrian plaintiffs assured that the ISIS attack on the plant on 19 September 2014 was “100% foreseeable” due to ISIS’s territorial advance and the heavy bombardments of the regime on the city of Manbij from January 2014 onwards. They stated that in the summer 2014, “explosions” could very often be heard from the plant. Despite this growing danger, the plant was operating at full capacity: “we were producing a lot of cement”.

While Bruno Pescheux declared “You will not find, in my career, decisions that fundamentally endangered the lives of my employees”, the plaintiffs’ testimonies show otherwise. Several employees described being “trapped in a dark tunnel” and “sacrificing their lives for the plant”.

When asked about the evacuation plan, N. replied: “What evacuation are you talking about? It wasn’t an evacuation, it was an escape!”, all other plaintiffs confirmed that there was no proper evacuation plan in place. In fact, as fighting intensified, 27 employees were told they had to remain in the plant to shut down the kiln – a process requiring 48 hours – while ISIS was approaching the plant as it fought the Kurds in the nearby village. The factory on-site director reassured them: “Don’t be afraid. There is no reason to be scared. Everything is fine.” The next morning, he fled the plant with his family. Employees were left without instructions, having never received any security training in the case of an external attack after two years of work in a conflict zone, without any evacuation bus or plan, forced to escape using the three remaining private vehicles on site. N. described it as “a day of horror.” Two days later, Frederic Jolibois, defendant in the case and LCS director working from Jordan, circulated a message to all employees that “the evacuation had been carried out extraordinarily well”, something K. found infuriating “We almost lost our lives that day!”

**Conclusion: “Employees were Lafarge’s very last concern” – N.**

N. concluded: “On my first day at Lafarge, I saw a motto I will never forget: ‘safety first’ while in reality, when the conflict started, it was ‘factory first’”. All in all, Lafarge’s carelessness,

relativization, and profit-driven logics regarding its employees' security could be captured by a sentence pronounced by Jacob Waerness, LCS former security manager, defendant in the case: *"for me, security is integrated into business"*.

*Read our previous weekly report (hearings of 24-28 November, 2025) here :*  
[https://www.ecchr.eu/fileadmin/Fallbeschreibungen/Weekly\\_reports\\_3\\_Lafarge\\_2025.pdf](https://www.ecchr.eu/fileadmin/Fallbeschreibungen/Weekly_reports_3_Lafarge_2025.pdf)