Lebanon:
Investigating the Situation of Syrian Refugees under COVID-19 Pandemic

Refugees between Lack of Aid and Human Rights Violations

Research Paper

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Introduction

As Lebanon enters the state of general mobilization and health emergencies to fight the spread of COVID-19 for the seventh week in a row, the urgent need for Syrian refugees for humanitarian assistance is increasing, in the absence of a response plan for the situation of refugees who are suffering mainly from a lack of basic living conditions and increasing discriminatory rhetoric against refugees by some Lebanese municipalities, amid a terrible silence by the Lebanese government about arbitrary and discriminatory measures and decisions against refugees, in addition to the wide spread of security forces in the areas that contributes to supporting the decisions of those municipalities to limit the freedom of movement of "Syrian refugees" only, in addition to restricting them in various aspects of life, and increasing their abuse.

Access Center for Human Rights team is monitoring the general situation of Syrian refugees in several Lebanese areas, and has intensified its focus on observation operations as the pandemic begins, which has warmed up the pace of events in Lebanon, and outlined key issues that are likely to cause serious human rights violations to individuals or groups in refugee communities, while the pandemic could put more risk to the lives of thousands of refugees. Our field team found that tension among refugees has increased, and human rights violations has worsened in many areas while few in areas that has developed a local response plan respecting for human rights.

And on the stage of the events that Lebanon witnessed recently from cases of violence, killing and numerous violations against a number of refugees, ACHR team prepared this research paper to summarize the situation of Syrian refugees in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, hoping that the picture of the increasing suffering of refugees will be clarified for the Lebanese authorities, UNHCR, government donors and civil society organizations, and that they are

informed of the situation of refugees on the ground in a more comprehensive way than the periodic reports produced by ACHR upon the declaration of a state of emergency and general mobilization last March. In addition, we are aiming to clarify the needs of civil society organizations working on the front-line with refugees, through which their teams are most at risk of transmission of the virus to them, in order to provide the necessary facilities to expand their activity in refugee communities, mainly those working in the health and relief sectors.

The recommendations made by civil society organizations and alliances in reports and statements, and the recently published position papers outlining the necessary recommendations raised to the Lebanese government and the European Union wishing and/or requesting them to implement, have not been taken into account. The number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is estimated to be 910,256 registered with UNHCR as of January 2020[1], while the Lebanese government still claims that around 550,000 people living in Lebanon are not registered with UNHCR.[2] The high number of refugees in Lebanon has increased the pressure of the Lebanese authorities on refugees, which has negatively affected their living situation and deprived them from their basic rights, due to the absence of a plan to regulate and manage the asylum situation since the beginning of the refugee crisis in Lebanon in 2011.

Despite the assistance received by Lebanon from the United Nations, some Gulf states and Europe, and the European Union[3] to support the state for hosting refugees, in addition to the activities of civil society organizations - working in the relief sector in particular - contributed to the raising of the country's economy in many ways, leading to the creation of thousands of jobs for citizens, in addition to increasing supply and demand in the Lebanese markets for various goods, revitalizing the real estate market (sale or rental) and improving the infrastructure

[1] "بوابة البيانات التشغيلية Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response, n.d." .
https://data2.unhcr.org/ar/situations/syria/location/71.

[2] Roth, Kenneth. "World Report 2019." Human Rights Watch, January 17, 2019. https://tinyurl.com/v233tqw.

[3] الحموي نبيلة، حسن محمد، بيازيد قتيبة، لطف أحمد سامي. ماهية حق العمل للاجئين السوريين والفلسطينيين في لبنان. مركز وصول لحقوق الإنسان 2020 .
https://www.achrights.org/ar/2020/03/06/10559/.

of some Lebanese areas and villages and increasing the number of Lebanese schools due to international grants.[4]

[4] المفوضية السامية للأمم المتحدة لشؤون اللاجئين. لبنان=https://www.unhcr.org/ar/4be7cc278c2.html?query .UNHCR .لبنان.

Research Methodology

ACHR adopts international standards including "accuracy, “objective", and "neutrality" in its priorities for the preparation of any of its papers, which are consistent with international monitoring and documentation standards. Whereas field investigations and communications are conducted through programmes secured, encrypted and open source with victims -who have been directly abused - relatives or close associates individually, ensuring their independence in their statements, where ACHR ensures that the identities of individuals at risk are kept confidential. The interviews are based on the same list of questions about the same facts to ascertain the authenticity of the information provided, in the original language of the persons interviewed, and without any financial compensation.

ACHR relies on multiple research approaches to issue reports and data related to the unit, the most important of which is descriptive and desk review. ACHR conducts a special analysis of data collected from multiple sources through research mechanisms, including interviews with victims directly or with their first-degree relatives, surveys, as well as reliable electronic references as previous reports and research, In addition to analysing media reports and official data after verification. The team interviewed those involved in this report, including refugees in several areas, particularly those living in the camps, and civil society organizations active in working with Syrian refugees and focused on the Bekaa region, where the largest number of refugees are located, while using the centre's database.

ACHR team is doing its best to respect the standards of neutrality, objectivity and integrity of the information contained in its publications, in spite of the serious challenges facing the team in reporting and publications, the least that the researchers and the team who participated in completing the work felt the least of the security threat or their exposure to arbitrary harassment or persecution by the

Lebanese security services. The latter has traditionally harassed and prosecuted human rights activists residing in Lebanon, Lebanese, Syrians or otherwise, who are deeply opposed to the ongoing systematic official violations of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. These harassments range from arbitrary summonses to interrogation centres without respect for applicable legal procedures (i.e., without being based on a decision by the Public Prosecutor's Office or any other judicial body), where they are deprived of legal rights guaranteed by article 47 of the Lebanese Code of Criminal Law (the right to contact their relatives and meet with a lawyer), and to the denial of access to or renewal of legal residency in Lebanon (for Syrian and foreign activists). The Lebanese General Directorate of Public Security officially waved this policy of denial of residence in a statement[5] published on its official website on 17 June 2019, in which it threatened associations that denounced the deportation procedures for Syrian refugees that they were "in the process of taking all legal measures and reviewing the competent judiciary to stop the actions and employees of any organization.

[5] بيان صادر عن الأمن العام حول بعض الجمعيات والمنتديات. إعلانات ومستجدات.https://www.general-security.gov.lb/ar/news/details/720 .

Analysis of the current situation in Lebanon

So far, the COVID-19 pandemic in Lebanon has been classified as in the third stage, with relatively fewer patients and fewer deaths, but social isolation measures have greatly increased the vulnerability of the economic and political situation, with the loss of livelihoods (work, food, rental of real estate) first in the order of current needs by local associations and networks. Priorities can be set by different parties as they appear through the media and community conversations in the following order (Table 1):

Priorities	**Lebanese Government**	**Lebanese Local Community**	**Refugees**
1	Controlling the pandemic	Economic Living Situation	Economic Living Situation
2	Security Stability	Controlling the pandemic	Security Stability
3	Economic Living Situation	Security Stability	Controlling the pandemic

Protection from the epidemic is not a priority for refugees because of their very low living conditions, while the authority is not concerned about the living situation of refugees, as some municipalities have expressed this when the responsibility of Syrian refugees has been placed on the shoulders of the United Nations, while the Authority agrees with the refugees on the importance of maintaining security stability, which is deteriorating in the Lebanese society . These differences caused an incident in the Bekaa city of Gaza[6], where workers did not abide by the curfew imposed by the local authority "municipality", and preferred to work to abide by the curfew, and when the local security mandated by the municipality to impose the curfew, it did not give priority to security stability or the risk of the spread of the virus if refugees were forced to move, and he knows that Syrians are easy to replace as a labor force in the local economy. The situation had evolved into a violent conflict that was about to change the lives of thousands of refugees. It remains to be remembered of the reciprocal role

[6] بيان توضيحي في قضية الإشكال بين مخيم للاجئين وأهالي منطقة غزّة في لبنان. مركز وصول لحقوق الإنسان 2020 .
https://www.achrights.org/ar/2020/04/19/10788/.

between the authority and society through the municipality on the one hand, and the structure of tribal/sectarian political representation on the other.

Syrian asylum in Lebanon is governed by policies that have evolved in the light of the Syrian conflict and its impact on the political, economic and security situation in Lebanon, on the one hand, and Lebanese political polarization on the other. Although most of the policies pursued by the refugee rule precede the current government, and precede the pandemic, its impact is effective and ongoing. The following table summarizes official and informal public policies, local and central, and their impact on the important groups of this proposal:

	Ongoing Policies	**Impact on Refugees**	**Impact on Refugee Organizations**	**Cumulative Response on Covid-19 Response**
Official	Legal marginalization (Residency, work…)	Restriction of movement. A large group of refugees are outside the law.	Restriction of movement and activity of organizations. Emigration of many volunteers, especially those of experience and competence.	Difficulty in reaching the refugee community or to positively impact it.
	Restriction of international support through state institutions.	The regression of direct relief programs and deepening the impact of poverty.	The suspension of organizations' licenses. Superficial influence of organizations on society.	Deepening impact of poverty. Centralized Response. Increase of the burden on the official health institution.

	Authorizing municipalities to implement isolation policies.	Discriminatory procedures against refugees.	Restrictions of the organizations' access to camps. Volunteers fear getting harmed due to their work.	Intensifying the isolation of the refugee community compared to the Lebanese community and increasing the possibility of a collision between them.
Unofficial	Absolute powers for the security services in dealing with refugees	Refugees fear the official Lebanese institution.		The refugee is reluctant to cooperate with official agencies, fearing prosecution and arrest.
	The persistence of incitement against refugees.	Increase in operations of violence and collective punishment, deportation, beating and closure of businesses.	Diminishing social work and direct exposure of volunteers and activists to violence.	The marginalization of refugees from local initiatives, the increased potential for violence amongst communities.
Local	Empowering de facto forces (parties, clans, etc.) to manage the refugee file.	Refugees are counted on this or that group, subject to rivalries and malice.	Organizations are forced to be biased, which exposes them to rivalries and malice.	Weakening the ability of the central government to implement a comprehensive national plan.

Accordingly, public policies towards refugees, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (and before the current government), may affect efforts to combat the emerging pandemic, with a clear attitude towards refugees, the continuity of these policies in producing a fragile refugee situation, increasing the chances of spreading the disease on the one hand and increasing the chances of secondary consequences on the other (e.g. the Gaza Bekaa region incident)

Summary of the general situation of Syrian refugees

Economic conditions and livelihoods

The economic situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon continues to deteriorate following the economic crisis in Lebanon and the lack of a plan to manage the refugee crisis. It is estimated that 69% of Syrian refugees still live below the poverty line (51% of Syrian families are extremely poor.)[7] In 2019, funding requirements to support Syrian refugees in Lebanon were estimated at $2.62 billion, but only 47% were provided in the same year.[8]

The legal status of refugees, especially Syrians, imposed by Lebanon in contravention of the Constitution and international conventions and treaties, makes it difficult to find jobs or move freely between regions, forcing them (including children and women) to work in Informal sectors under poor conditions, low wages, and without any guarantees, in order to meet their basic needs and get their daily wages, leading families to increasingly rely on debt, 88% of Syrian households of four in debt with an average of $1,016.[9]

According to UNHCR statistics, 81% of Syrian refugees registered in Lebanon are women and children and are the most vulnerable groups. Fear of arrest or deportation leads men to send their children and wives to work because they are less likely to be arrested and interrogated. It was found that 5% of refugee children between the ages of 5 and 17 worked at least one day in the 30 days prior

[7] دراسة أممية سنوية: في عام 2018 تراكمت ديون اللاجئين السوريين في لبنان أكثر من أي وقت مضى - UNHCR Lebanon. UNHCR n.d. https://www.unhcr.org/lb/12042-دراسة-أممية-سنوية-في-عام-2018-تراكمت-ديون-ا.html.

[8] خطة لبنان للاستجابة للأزمة، تحديث تمويل نهاية السنة، حتى 31 كانون الأول، 2019 https://tinyurl.com/y78xmvcd

[9] خطة لبنان للاستجابة للازمة (2017 – 2020)، تحديث 2019 https://tinyurl.com/r6zvy742

to school.[10] In addition, economic activities are mainly carried out by male boys, whereas domestic work by girls. The difficult living conditions drive them to resort to early marriage, where there has been a rise in child marriage. The proportion of girls aged 15 to 19 who are currently married reached 29% in 2018, up 7% from the previous year.[11]

As for food security among refugees, a survey in 2015 revealed that 94.5% of refugees are generally food insecure, and 63% are severely food insecure.[12] 90% of refugees living in the Baalbek-Hermel and Akkar regions, where the largest proportion of Syrian refugees are located in Lebanon, suffer from food insecurity to varying degrees.[13] They are increasingly relying on negative response strategies for nutrition.[14]

The outbreak of the pandemic came in the midst of Lebanon's worst financial crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war, when the exchange rate of the US dollar against the Lebanese pound on April 27, 2020 reached between 4,200 and 4,300 Lebanese pounds on the black market, although the Governor of the Central Bank of Lebanon issued a circular setting a maximum price for selling the dollar to the tellers at 3,200 Lebanese pounds against U.S. dollar[15].

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[10] دراسة أممية سنوية: في عام 2018 تراكمت ديون اللاجئين السوريين في لبنان أكثر من أي وقت مضى - UNHCR Lebanon. UNHCR n.d. https://www.unhcr.org/lb/12042-دراسة-أممية-سنوية-في-عام-2018-تراكمت-ديون-ا.html.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Chaaban, J., Salti, N., Ghattas, H., Irani, A., Ismail, T.,Batlouni, L. (2016), "Survey on the Socioeconomic Status of Palestine Refugees in Lebanon 2015", Report published by the American University of Beirut (AUB) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

[13] خطة لبنان للاستجابة للازمة (2017 – 2020)، تحديث 2019 https://tinyurl.com/r6zvy74.

[14] Chaaban, J., Salti, N., Ghattas, H., Irani, A., Ismail, T.,Batlouni, L. (2016), "Survey on the Socioeconomic Status of Palestine Refugees in Lebanon 2015", Report published by the American University of Beirut (AUB) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

[15] الدولار يواصل الارتفاع... كم بلغ سعر الصرف اليوم؟ LBCI Lebanon 2020. https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/d/lebanon/516614/الدولار-يواصل-الارتفاع-كم-بلغ-سعر-الصرف-اليوم.ar/

The suffering of Syrian refugees has begun to worsen sharply over the past months, worsened under quarantine with increased anxiety and fear, and the repercussions of the pandemic may be more deadly than the virus itself. The current conditions under COVID-19 have a significant impact on the inability of refugees to access livelihoods and the ability to meet their basic needs such as securing rental homes, food and medicines and thus their inability to access prevention tools, especially since most of them depend on daily and seasonal work, which had been interrupted by quarantine and fear of leaving the camp because of the increased presence of security services and barriers of local security assigned by municipalities. The economic impact extends even to those living outside the camps, as ACHR has recently received at least nine cases of Syrian refugees living in several areas threatened (at risk of eviction at any moment) and/or forced to evacuate their homes, most of whom are not receiving UNHCR assistance, in addition to dozens of camps.

Access to Health Care

On the medical aspect, refugees have difficulty accessing primary and secondary health care at all levels of response, on the one hand, due to structural problems in the Lebanese health system, additional difficulties related to the structure of international support with respect to the relationship with the Lebanese Government and the recent decrease in support, on the other hand, accompanied by the continuing Lebanese economic crisis.

Civil society NGOs and UNHCR are the primary beneficiaries of refugees' access to health care, but the actions and restrictions imposed by many municipalities on refugees, particularly with regard to full or near-total curfews, with the increased presence of municipal security agencies and barriers of local security, have exposed refugees to numerous risks and restricted their access to health care, as well as restricting the movement and activity of working health-care organizations to reach refugees.

A civil society organization (which runs medical clinics providing health care services to Syrian refugees) working with refugees in Lebanon reported to ACHR that the number of people visiting their centers throughout Lebanon decreased, with one clinic reporting a nearly 80 percent drop in visits since the beginning of the general mobilization (from 400 patients per day to 80 days). This decrease is likely to be associated with increased barriers to the movement of refugees as ACHR monitored the activity of a number of NGOs that provided mobile medical services that were prevented from entering the camps and/or had difficulty obtaining access to them.

Another civil society organization working with Syrian refugees in Lebanon (which also runs a mobile clinic in several Lebanese areas) claimed that it was unable to obtain permission from municipalities to operate its clinics in the camps until mid-April, about a month after the announcement of the general mobilization. The organization took alternative ways to continue its work and doctors resorted to providing advice via social media as WhatsApp, and when they were able to visit the camp, they took very careful measures in prevention ways when dealing with refugees. The organization continues to have difficulties in obtaining facilities from the authorities so far.

In this context, refugees are forced to rely on clinics present in their locality, which may not be sufficient and/or available in some areas. Most medical centers have recorded a decrease in the participation of medical staff during their shifts. Most of the medical centers are often overcrowded. In addition, it is difficult for refugees to access health care in public and/or private hospitals because of their inability to cover the remaining amounts from UNHCR coverage of certain conditions, which often do not include chronic diseases, which may require refugees to pay full hospital costs without UNHCR assistance, and because of the bureaucracy of procedures of partners responsible for granting approvals to cover the costs of the care of refugee patients, which can often be lengthy and complex

and require a series of actions between UNHCR partners in the administrative section of the hospitals and the contracted UNHCR itself.[16]

Legal Situation

The Lebanese authorities have pledged not to arrest or deport Syrian refugees for lack of valid residency if they have to take the COVID-19 test.[17] Despite this guarantee, it is necessary to ask what measures the authorities may take against the refugees after this health crisis is over. Refugees fear being arrested or deported after this crisis, as authorities are aware of their information and locations, which may expose them to further risk.

The fear of arrest or harassment of refugees in some municipalities by residents or by local security assigned by the municipalities themselves creates a state of fear among refugees to report the symptoms of COVID-19. On the other hand, large numbers of Syrian refugees do not have identification papers, due to the seizure of their official documents by the authorities (whether during detention, during the renewal of residence papers without official legal justification), by hospitals (because of the inability of refugees to pay for their patients), or by the homeowner (because of the delay in paying the rent or for fear of leaving the house without a tenant). The fact that the refugees do not have identification papers is a major challenge to access basic services and may hinder their basic daily activity.

[16] Chehayeb K, Sewell A. Lebanon COVID-19 lockdown restricts healthcare access for refugees. The New Humanitarian 2020. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2020/04/21/Lebanon-coronavirus-refugee-healthcare.

[17] علوه سعدى. شراء علبة بنادول يتسبّب بفتح تحقيق بلدي وطرد عائلة: اللاجئون السوريون عالقون بين كورونا والعَوَز. المفكرة القانونية 2020-https://www.legal-agenda.com/article.php?id=6663.

Intervention by Civil Society Organizations

The activity and work of civil society organizations working with Syrian refugees has diminished as humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees by donors has shrunken, and with increased indirect pressure from the Lebanese authorities, how are civil society organizations working under great pressure in this crisis? How much are they capable of emergency intervention? What are the conditions and challenges of field teams?

Although the needs of refugees for humanitarian assistance and medical care have increased significantly, and beyond the capacity of civil society organizations working with refugees to secure them, many of these organizations have stepped up their efforts and expanded their intervention by trying to cover wider segments of refugee communities to address the COVID-19 crisis, particularly following the imposition of public isolation measures, many of which have made great efforts to try to meet those needs, even those that are not involved in relief or medical projects.

According to a poll conducted with 198 refugees - including Syrians and Palestinians from Syria from the areas of Bar Elias, Shatila, Tripoli and Nabaa- by a local association between March 30 and April 15, 2020, the basic needs of Syrian refugees have worsened in the face of the COVID-19 crisis, adding that:[18]

- 85% of them lost their jobs and therefore lost their daily income;
- 89% of them have no access to any prevention or other tools;
- Only one participant out of 198 reported receiving some assistance, while all the other participants did not receive any food or preventive assistance; and
- 38% of them require additional information on virus prevention. 48% do not know which hotline they can call if they suspect any symptoms.

[18] Refugee Protection Watch. Briefing on COVID-19 and Lebanon 2020. https://www.paxforpeace.nl/publications/all-publications/covid-19-in-lebanon-impact-on-refugees-and-host-communities.

These figures indicate that refugees may be subjected to further abuses and exploitation, as well as increased psychological pressures as a result of increased stress and anxiety. Therefore, the assistance/support of civil society organizations with access to refugee communities should be accelerated, especially in light of the current general mobilization measures, which could last several weeks longer and may reach several months as the risks to the entire population in Lebanon increase.

Civil Society Initiatives to Fight COVID-19

Despite a significant lack of funding in the relief and medical sectors of civil society organizations working with refugees, ACHR has monitored notable achievements in the activities of local organizations/associations to assist refugees in a few areas, to overcome the worsening of the humanitarian crisis under the shadow of COVID-19, and we have noted the following:

- A few associations that previously worked in the field of relief have strengthened and increased their assistance, particularly in the Bekaa region, where teams have been able to distribute food, detergents and sterile items in many camps, as well as providing online awareness and psychological support sessions;
- Financial assistance to pay rents to prevent forced morality of many critical situations;
- Re-direct funding of other projects to relief projects with the aim of covering needs in the current crisis; and
- Responding in the provision of medical care, at the present time, is still in the prevention and protection stage due to the absence of cases among the refugees, but it is working in coordination with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on a proactive plan that includes isolation strategy at four levels to become focal points at this stage.

It has been clearly noted that effective coordination between local organizations and associations is aimed at unifying objectives and resources in order to avoid a

repetition of work in order to reach a larger segment of refugees to fill existing needs gaps.

Challenges faced by Civil Society Organizations under COVID-19

Although civil society organizations have increased their activity and work to cope with the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic in an effort to meet the needs of refugees, several challenges have been monitored by ACHR team in its interviews with a number of these organizations, and summarized the following:

- Local organizations and associations are unable to access funding to provide humanitarian assistance and health care, and the available resources in these two sectors have become very limited, as most organizations resorted to collecting collective donations, yet there is a clear lack of these organizations because of the urgent need of refugees for a large segment of them;
- Failure to facilitate the withdrawal of funds from private and central banks, where withdrawals are made in L ebanese pounds according to the official exchange rate. As the economic crisis worsened and prices increased dramatically, the money that was sufficient to help 100 families became less than a third of the number, given the low value of the Lebanese pound, which led to higher prices for consumer goods, house rent, and many basic services in Lebanon;
- The inability of organizations to obtain work permits to establish mobile legal clinics in the camps, which are often of the responsibility of municipalities or the Ministry of the Interior directly in the meantime, to grant such permits; and
- Fear and anxiety caused by the activity of Syrian doctors who face restrictions in their practice of the profession, which the authorities impose on them incapacitating conditions that were difficult to implement before COVID-19, and increased complications during the crisis.

UNHCR response

UNHCR has developed a detailed response plan to address the spread of COVID-19 in refugee communities, including proactive measures and measures to intervene in medical affairs by treating the injured and/or conducting the necessary examinations of those with COVID-19 symptoms, if any, knowing that as of April 16, 2020, one case among Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR was recorded for a person living alone in an apartment outside the camps.[19]

UNHCR, in cooperation and coordination with various UN agencies, and local and international NGOs, provides the needs of refugee families, intervenes in emergency response, and works at the basic level to divert all their collective resources to meet the demands of these families, but they face challenges and difficulties in meeting these ever-increasing and worsening needs due to the general economic crisis in Lebanon and the country's health emergency.[20]

UNHCR faces many challenges, from a lack of financial resources that is a major challenge, and UNHCR is calling on donors to increase funding to meet the growing demands of refugees beyond UNHCR's financial capacity. It faces another challenge, which the difficulty of continuing other medical assistance programs after the reallocation of financial resources to be serve in the COVID-19 anti-proliferation plan.[21]

Actions taken by UNHCR

UNHCR is working through the national plan announced by the Lebanese Government, and in this context, UNHCR has taken many measures to ensure

[19] UNHCR. Lebanon COVID-19 UPDATE 2020. http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR Lebanon COVID-19 Update - 16APR20_0.pdf.

[20] Based on special interview with UNHCR team on 23 April 2020

[21] Ibid.

that medical care reaches and educates refugees to protect them from the pandemic, most notably:[22]

- Cover the full cost of PCR blood test and treatment of Syrian refugees whether registered or not with UNHCR, based on the recommendations of the Ministry of Health;
- UNHCR has strengthened the hospital and accommodated the intensive care unit;
- Expand shelter, water, sanitation and hygiene interventions to facilitate the difficulties of committing to quarantine in camps. For example, isolation sites have been established in areas where a large number of refugees live.[23] UNHCR's financial resources have been rearranged to support the emergency response to the COVID-19;
- UNHCR has provided awareness sessions for refugees, as well as messages on phones, videos posted on social media and multiple websites to deliver them to Syrian refugees;
- Distribution of cleaning and sterilization tools to refugees in many refugee camps and communities. As of April 16, 2020, it had provided cleaning materials including disinfectants, bleaches and hygiene information to 30,700 refugees living in 438 communities;
- Provided technical and task force support to expand the capacity of the Ministry of Health's COVID-19 hotline;
- It expands the capacity of a number of hospitals or "field hospitals" as appropriate.;
- UNHCR is working with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to ensure and promote respect for human rights during the implementation of the pandemic response plan, given the current situation and the increasing complexity of the actions related to the COVID-19 crisis, and to ensure that cash and food assistance is delivered

[22] UNHCR. Lebanon COVID-19 UPDATE 2020. http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR Lebanon COVID-19 Update - 30MAR20.pdf.

[23] UNHCR. Lebanon COVID-19 UPDATE 2020. http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR Lebanon COVID-19 Update - 16APR20_0.pdf.

to vulnerable beneficiaries, UNHCR, in coordination with World Food Program (WFP) has discussed alternative ways of distributing cards with refugees. The Food Security and Agriculture Sector (FSS) also maps and coordinates the interventions of UNHCR partners on food aid and how to provide them under quarantine in informal communities.[24]

Lebanese Government Response

With Syrian refugees suffering from ever-changing policies and violations of their fundamental rights, will the COVID-19 pandemic be influential for changing Lebanon's policy towards refugees by respecting human rights, or will it increase its violations of public rights and freedoms?

With Lebanon's commitment to the principle of non-discrimination between citizens and refugees, the Lebanese government included refugees with its national plan, after coordinating with UNHCR. However, it did not put an end to the disruptions of municipalities that imposed discriminatory measures through decisions that restricted refugees and limited their freedom of movement, compared to national citizens, which contributed to the high rate of serious violations against refugees, and on the other hand helped some citizens of those municipalities to exploit refugees, especially by local security personnel assigned by the municipalities.

Syrian refugees Inclusion in the National Plan

The Minister of Health stated that health care for refugees is a joint responsibility between the Lebanese state and UN agencies, and despite the inclusion of

[24] Relief International. Guidance on Home Quarantine & Isolation in Overcrowded Settings. Lebanon 2020. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/75198.pdf.

refugees in the national response plan, UNHCR is responsible for all the costs of treating and examining injured or vulnerable refugees.[25] However, the Ministry of Health has not carried out any monitoring of the medical centers concerned with receiving infected cases, or to conduct tests for those who show symptoms, This led to refugees sensing discrimination compared to national citizens during their visit to medical centers for examinations and/or any needs for medical care. The Lebanese government has not taken any measures that will ease the security pressure on refugee communities that cause fear, and this may contribute to the spread of the virus in refugee communities as they become increasingly afraid of being arrested or subjected to any violations by the security services or by local security personnel assigned to UNHCR.

Intervention in Syrian Refugee Communities

As the Lebanese government began implementing the response plan for the Coved crisis, including refugees in the national plan,

- Public security has contributed to monitoring and coordination with a number of municipalities and civil society organizations to supervise the sterilization of several camps and housing communities for Syrian refugees in various Lebanese regions, as a step to protect the society as a whole in the dangers of the spread of COVID-19, most notably: Qab Elias, Hermel, Al-Kaukah, Ma'an, Ma'a'a'a'a, Al-Wazai camp, Zahrani-Sarfand, al-Khader.[26] In Hermel in the northern Bekaa, the municipality, in

[25] Saleh W, Bassam L. Without soap or sanitizer, Syrian refugees face coronavirus threat. Reuters 2020. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-lebanon-refugees/without-soap-or-sanitizer-syrian-refugees-face-coronavirus-threat-idUSKBN21635U.

[26] ع.غ . الامن العام: تعقيم 119 مخيما للنازحين السوريين لليوم الرابع للوقاية من الوباء-. National News Agency 2020. http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/469940/nna-leb.gov.lb.

cooperation with civil society organizations, sprayed homes and camps with disinfectants and disinfectan;.

- The Lebanese government has pledged not to arrest or deport Syrian refugees on the grounds who do not have valid residency if they are going to take COVID-19 test;
- Public security has decided to set up a central network with cells in the provinces to combat the spread of COVID-19 in Syrian refugee camps and communities;[27]
- The General Directorate of Public Security announced the possibility of Syrian refugees renewing expired residences as of March 11, 2020 after the end of the mobilization period without incurring delays;[28]
- A large number of tenants in the Bekaa town of Gaza have been exempted from rental allowances in cooperation with town residents;
- Some associations have distributed aid to Syrian refugees in several areas in cooperation with municipalities. In the municipality of Darya in Al-Shuf, food rations were distributed to 10 Syrian families because of their urgent need; and
- The Ministry of Social Affairs has developed a proactive and precautionary plan to combat COVID-19, particularly in Syrian refugee camps, in partnership and in cooperation with various international organizations. This plan includes the implementation of awareness campaigns and health guidance for the population in all Syrian refugee camps and the provision of clean-up and disinfection materials in cooperation with UNHCR.[29]

[27] ل.خ . الامن العام ينشىء خلايا في المحافظات للحد من انتشار الكورونا في مخيمات النازحين. الوكالة الوطنية للإعلام http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/469352/nna-leb.gov.lb/ar.

[28] إعفاء من رسوم تأخير طلبات منح أو تجديد الإقامات نظراً للظروف الراهنة. Lebanese General Security - News 2020. https://www.general-security.gov.lb/ar/news/details/896.

[29] وزارة الشؤون الاجتماعية: تنسيق استباقي مع المنظمات الدولية بدأ منذ أكثر من أسبوع للحماية من فيروس كورونا في مخيّمات النازحين. وزارة الشؤون الاجتماعية 2020 . http://www.socialaffairs.gov.lb/MSASubPage.aspx?News=2377.

ACHR welcomes the initiative of the Lebanese state to sterilize the camps and gatherings and its cooperation with international organizations and UNHCR to implement awareness-raising campaigns and secure the materials necessary to limit the spread of this pandemic, but the number of sterile camps is very low with respect to the number of camps spread on Lebanese territory, in addition to the actual absence of this sterilization.

Human Rights Violations against Syrian refugees

Despite the positive initiatives of the Lebanese government, many municipalities have taken discriminatory and inflexible decisions against Syrian refugees under the pretext of combating COVID-19, while the security services support the decisions of those municipalities, amid the silence of the Lebanese government despite the recent recommendations of civil society organizations addressed to the Lebanese government.

Eight municipalities issued a curfew for Syrian refugees, without addressing any Lebanese citizen, before the government declared a state of general mobilization, while at least 21 municipalities imposed crippling restrictions on Syrian refugees that limited their movement and made it difficult for them to access basic services, under the threat of legal action against violators of the decisions and promised to confiscate their identity papers, these include the municipality of Al-Bireh, Harar, and the municipalities of Rashia district.[30] Some municipalities, such as The Municipality of Brital, have also placed these restrictions under legal action against violators of decisions and promised to confiscate their identity papers. In Bar Elias, refugees must appoint a specific representative to purchase and meet the basic needs of the camps after coordinating with the municipality to this end.[31] The municipality of Beziza has banned deportation without warning if the curfew is not respected.[32]

In the Bekaa region, all roads leading to the gathering of at least 10 camps have been closed, and one road has been left open, headed by a barrier for the local security personnel assigned by the municipalities, that prevents refugees from leaving the vicinity of their camps and is not even allowed to go out to buy basic

[30] خطة الطوارئ بدأت والبلديات تراقب التنفيذ استنفار الشرطة وحملات رشّ وتعقيم. المركزية 2020

[31] لبنان: إجراءات مواجهة فيروس "كورونا" تهدد اللاجئين. Human Rights Watch 2020. https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2020/04/02/340258 .

[32] LBCI News. بلدية بزيزا: سنرحّل أي نازح لا يلتزم بالتعليمات الوقائية/507642 .LBCI Lebanon 2020. https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/d/lebanon بلدية-بزيزا-سنرحل-أي-نازح-لا-يلتزم-بالتعليمات-الوق.ar/

necessities. It also imposes on them the condition that they obtain travel permits from municipalities which are difficult to reach due to the security forces barrier (from the impossible restrictions imposed by some municipalities), while Lebanese citizens are not required to obtain permission from the municipality.[33]

With these crippling conditions, municipalities in Qabarin, Kafr Melki, Al-Muqataa and Tala'a have recently recruited an additional 20 local security personnel from the municipalities of those areas to guard 180 Syrian refugee camps, where municipal police close the entrances to the camps and leave one entrance for use for "maximum necessity."[34]

At least nine camps in different towns in the Bekaa region have been raided by various security agencies on an almost daily basis without any legal justification, as their registration papers are searched with UNHCR and legal residence papers. They also conduct a census of camp population to determine changing number of individuals, even beating those responsible for the families.[35]

Some municipalities have taken decisions to evacuate and forcibly deport Syrian refugees residing in their areas. In Mount Lebanon, a municipality deported two families from the area after a boy left the camp to buy a box of "Panadol", which raised fear among young volunteers to help the municipality implement the general mobilization decision (with the existing risk of COVID-19) and demanded that the municipality deport the family.[36] Also, Gaza municipality in the western Bekaa took a decision to completely vacate Camp 011, which

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[33] استمرار التضييق على اللاجئين السوريين في لبنان بظل أزمة كوفيد-١٩. مركز وصول لحقوق الإنسان 2020 .
https://www.achrights.org/ar/2020/04/15/10772/.

[34] علوه سعدى. شراء علبة بنادول يتسبّب بفتح تحقيق بلدي وطرد عائلة: اللاجئون السوريون عالقون بين كورونا والعَوَز. المفكرة القانونية 2020-https://www.legal . agenda.com/article.php?id=6663.

[35] استمرار التضييق على اللاجئين السوريين في لبنان بظل أزمة كوفيد-١٩. مركز وصول لحقوق الإنسان 2020 .
https://www.achrights.org/ar/2020/04/15/10772/.

[36] علوه سعدى. شراء علبة بنادول يتسبّب بفتح تحقيق بلدي وطرد عائلة: اللاجئون السوريون عالقون بين كورونا والعَوَز. المفكرة القانونية 2020-https://www.legal . agenda.com/article.php?id=6663.

includes about 60 families, after a bloody clash between the Lebanese residents of the area on the one hand and the Syrian refugees in the camp on the other hand, but the Ministry of Interior rejected this decision and the municipality made a reconciliation between the two parties to resolve the conflict.[37]

[37] بارسخيان لوسي. صدامات وجرحى بالبقاع: كورونا يضاعف النعرات ضد اللاجئين السوريين .Almodon 2020 .
https://www.almodon.com/society/2020/4/17/صدامات-وجرحى-بالبقاع-كورونا-يضاعف-النعرات-ضد-اللاجئين-السوريين.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Several civil society organizations in Lebanon monitored the conditions of Syrian refugees in the areas in which they are active, and these organizations contributed through many initiatives with the municipalities aiming to solve some of the problems faced by refugees. A small number of municipalities responded to these initiatives while the others adopted harsh measures against refugees based on the decisions of the municipality or relevant parties in the region, without referring to the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities. Therefore, the Access Center for Human Rights places these recommendations in the hands of those working on refugee matters and hopes that the relevant authorities take these recommendations into consideration.

To the Lebanese Government

- Unify the language of discourse and guidance for all residents on the Lebanese territory to prevent the spread of COVID-19;
- Activate supervision over municipalities and inform them of an official and public decision not to differentiate between refugees and citizens, and to remove restrictions placed by municipalities exclusively on refugees;
- Consider the importance of Lebanese government interfering with an official and public speech to the Lebanese citizens to exempt or postpone refugees' due housing rent;
- Support civil society organizations working in relief and health sectors with the recent funding from the European Union to Lebanon and provide transparency in the mechanism for disbursing fund;
- Assist civil society organizations in obtaining their funds in their original currency from their bank accounts;
- Allow activists, graduates and medical experts of Syrian nationality to work / intervene in urgent cases and provide them with the necessary facilitations, without placing restrictions and conditions for them to obtain legal residency papers and/or work permits;
- The immediate release of all Syrian detainees, especially those who have violated the terms of residency, the abolition of the requirements and conditions of residency for Syrian refugees, and the suspension of any prosecution or legal consequences for the violators; and

- Allow UNHCR to re-register refugees due to the protection needs of thousands of unregistered Syrians to ensure their safety and security, and to annul the Lebanese government's decision to suspend registration of refugees with the UNHCR.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

In addition to the recommendations of civil society organisations on 4 February 2020:

- Allocate a fund to support local organisations and initiatives that have direct access to refugees, especially those active in the health and relief sectors;
- Work on developing an urgent plan to support refugees most in need of humanitarian assistance and basic living expenses; and
- Transparently announce cooperation plans between the UNHCR and the Lebanese government.

Donors

- Provide urgent support to civil society organizations and front-line workers with refugees to secure essential supplies for prevention during their field activities;
- Provide civil society organizations with flexibility in differing part or all of the funds previously acquired for development projects, to use them for securing the basic needs of refugees.

The European Union

"The recommendations of civil society organizations to the European Union regarding its intervention in supporting Lebanon in containing the Covid-19 pandemic, 9 April 2020:

The European Union should conduct a review of its strategic plans for support to Lebanon in order to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, and consider the following recommendations of civil society organizations:

- Support Lebanon with an additional amount that includes rental coverage to halt any possible forced evictions that may arise from the refugees' inability to pay housing rent and the rent for campsites yearly/monthly;
- Establish a monitoring mechanism to assess Lebanon's interventions and its fund distribution to support the Lebanese community and refugees in coordination with all civil society organizations;
- Emphasize on the necessity of public inclusion of all relevant parties, including civil society organizations and support them in their areas of work to expand their intervention activities in refugee communities, particularly in providing relief assistance within the government response plan. The selectivity of the response and the application of political screening policies for population groups will have a negative impact on containing the pandemic and this includes correcting the discriminatory executive decisions of some municipalities against refugees;
- Allow activists, graduates and medical experts of Syrian nationality to work / interfere in urgent cases and provide them with the necessary facilitations, without placing restrictions and conditions for them to obtain legal residency papers and/or work permits;
- Immediate release of all Syrian detainees, especially those who have violated the terms of residency, the abolition of the requirements and conditions of residency for Syrian refugees, and the suspension of any prosecution or legal consequences for the violators; and
- Present a response plan for the COVID-19 tests, medicines, treatment and isolation for all, free of charge and without discrimination on the basis of gender, social class, marital status, nationality, ethnic origin, color, sexual orientation, age, disability or creed and provide equipment and medical necessities in all Lebanese regions equally.

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