

Lebanon:

# Investigating the Situation of Syrian Refugees under COVID-19 Pandemic

## Refugees between Lack of Aid and Human Rights Violations

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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 humanitarian assistance for Syrian refugees 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 on arbitrary and discriminatory measures and decisions against refugees, in addition to the wide spread security in the areas which further supports the decisions of those municipalities in limiting the freedom of movement of "Syrian refugees" exclusively, in addition to restricting them in various aspects of life, and increasing their mistreatment.

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 have developed a local response plan respecting human rights.

Considering the events that Lebanon witnessed recently, from cases of violence, murder 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<sup>1</sup>, while the Lebanese government still claims that around 550,000 people living in Lebanon are not registered with UNHCR.<sup>2</sup> 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, several Gulf states and Europe, and the European Union<sup>3</sup> 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 of some Lebanese areas and villages and increasing the number of Lebanese schools due to international grants.<sup>4</sup>

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

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

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

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

## Research Methodology

ACHR adopts international standards including "accuracy", "objectivity", and "neutrality" as a priority in the preparation of any of its papers, which are consistent with international monitoring and documentation standards. Whereas field investigations and communications are conducted through secured, encrypted and open source programs with victims, relatives or close associates, individually, ensuring their independence in their statements, where ACHR guarantees 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 such 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 camps, and civil society organizations actively working with Syrian refugees with focus on the Bekaa region, where the largest number of refugees are located, 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 outputs, in spite of the serious challenges facing the team in reports and publications, the least of which is the security threat felt by the researchers and the team who participated in completing the work and their exposure to arbitrary harassment or persecution by Lebanese security agencies. 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 General Security officially waved this policy of denial of residence in a statement<sup>5</sup> 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.

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<sup>5</sup> بيان صادر عن الأمن العام حول بعض الجمعيات والمنشآت. 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, real estate rental) prioritized by local organizations and networks in the context of current needs.. 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 due to their deteriorating living conditions, while authorities are not concerned about the living situation of refugees, as some municipalities have expressed this by placing the responsibility of Syrian in the hands of the United Nations, concurrently authorities agree with the refugees on the importance of maintaining security stability, which is worsening in the Lebanese society. These differences caused an incident in the Bekaa city of Gaza<sup>6</sup>, where workers did not abide by the curfew imposed by local authorities "municipality", and preferred to work, and when the local security mandated by the municipality to impose the curfew responded, it did not give priority to security stability or the risk of the spread of the virus if refugees were forced to move, knowing that Syrians are easy to replace as a labor force in the local economy. The situation evolved into a violent conflict that was about to change the lives of thousands of refugees. The reciprocal role between the authorities and society through the municipality on the one hand, and the

<sup>6</sup> بيان توضيحي في قضية الإشكال بين مخيم للاجئين وأهالي منطقة غزة في لبنان. مركز وصول لحقوق الإنسان 2020  
<https://www.achrighs.org/ar/2020/04/19/10788/>.

structure of tribal/sectarian political representation on the other must be kept in mind.

Syrian asylum in Lebanon is governed by policies that evolved in the light of the Syrian conflict and its impact on the political, economic and security situation in Lebanon, on one hand, and Lebanese political polarization on the other. Although most of the policies governing refugees precede the current government and precede the COVID-19 pandemic, their 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.		Intensifying the isolation of the refugee community compared to the Lebanese community and increasing the possibility of a collision between them.
<b>Unofficial</b>	Absolute powers for the security services in dealing with refugees	Refugees fear the official Lebanese institution.	Restrictions of the organizations' access to camps.  Volunteers fear getting harmed due to their work.	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.
<b>Local</b>	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 the absence of a clear attitude towards refugees and the continuity of these policies in producing a fragile refugee situation, which increases the chances of spreading the virus on 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.)<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup>

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 to school.<sup>10</sup> 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, causing a rise in child marriage. The proportion of girls

<sup>7</sup> دراسة أممية سنوية: في عام 2018 تراكم ديون اللاجئين السوريين في لبنان أكثر من أي وقت مضى UNHCR Lebanon. UNHCR n.d. <https://www.unhcr.org/lb/12042-l-تراكم-ديون-عام-2018-دراسة-أممية-سنوية-في-عام-2018.html>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/y78xmvd> خطة لبنان للاستجابة للأزمة، تحديث تمويل نهاية السنة، حتى 31 كانون الأول، 2019

<sup>9</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/r6zvy74>، تحديث (2019/2017 – 2020) خطة لبنان للاستجابة للأزمة

<sup>10</sup> دراسة أممية سنوية: في عام 2018 تراكم ديون اللاجئين السوريين في لبنان أكثر من أي وقت مضى UNHCR Lebanon. UNHCR n.d. <https://www.unhcr.org/lb/12042-l-تراكم-ديون-عام-2018-دراسة-أممية-سنوية-في-عام-2018.html>.

aged 15 to 19 who are currently married reached 29% in 2018, up 7% from the previous year.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> They are increasingly relying on negative response strategies for nutrition.<sup>14</sup>

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 money-changers at 3,200 Lebanese pounds against U.S. dollar<sup>15</sup>.

The suffering of Syrian refugees has begun to worsen sharply over the past months, aggravated 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

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> 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).

<sup>13</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/r6zvy74>, تحديث 2017(2019) – 2020 (خطة لبنان للاستجابة للارزمة).

<sup>14</sup> 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).

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

because of the increased presence of security agencies and local security checkpoints assigned by municipalities. The economic impact extends even to those living outside the camps, as ACHR has recently documented 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 total or near-total curfews, with the increased presence of municipal security agencies and local security checkpoints, 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 witnessing 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) reported 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 a social media platform, WhatsApp, and when they were able to visit the camp, they took preventive measures when dealing with refugees. The organization continues to face difficulties in obtaining facilitations from the authorities.

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 and 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 due to their inability to cover the remaining amounts from UNHCR coverage of certain conditions, which often does not include chronic diseases, which may require refugees to pay full hospital costs without UNHCR assistance, and due to 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.<sup>16</sup>

### 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.<sup>17</sup> Despite this guarantee, it is necessary to ask what measures the authorities may take against refugees after this health crisis is over. Refugees fear being arrested or deported

<sup>16</sup> 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>.

<sup>17</sup> 2020 المفكرة القانونية والعوز. اللاجئين السوريين عالقون بين كورونا والعوز. <https://www.legal-agenda.com/article.php?id=6663>.

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 refugees do not have identification papers is a major challenge to access basic services and may hinder their basic daily activity.

## 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 shrunk, and with increased indirect pressure from the Lebanese authorities, how are civil society organizations working under great pressure in this crisis? What is their capacity in intervening in emergency cases? 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:<sup>18</sup>

- 85% of them lost their jobs and therefore lost their daily income;
- 89% of them have no access to any prevention 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.

These figures indicate that refugees may be subjected to further abuse and exploitation, as well as growing 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

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<sup>18</sup> 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>.

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 sterilization items in many camps, as well as providing online awareness and psychological support sessions;
- Financial assistance to pay rents to prevent forced evacuation of many critical cases;
- Re-directed 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 Lebanese 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, as well as incapacitating conditions imposed by authorities which were difficult to implement before COVID-19 and became increasingly complicated during the crisis.

UNHCR has developed a detailed response plan to address the spread of COVID-19 in refugee communities, including proactive measures and procedures 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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup>

UNHCR faces many challenges, such as a lack of financial resources which constitutes a major challenge, the UNHCR is calling on donors to increase funding to meet the growing demands of refugees beyond UNHCR's financial capacity. Another challenge is the difficulty in continuing other medical assistance programs after the reallocation of financial resources to the COVID-19 response plan.<sup>21</sup>

### **Actions taken by UNHCR**

UNHCR is working within the national plan announced by the Lebanese Government, and in this context, UNHCR has taken many measures to ensure that medical care reaches and educates refugees to protect them from the pandemic, most notably:<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> UNHCR. Lebanon COVID-19 UPDATE 2020. [http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR Lebanon COVID-19 Update - 16APR20\\_0.pdf](http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Lebanon%20COVID-19%20Update%20-%2016APR20_0.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Based on special interview with UNHCR team on 23 April 2020

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> UNHCR. Lebanon COVID-19 UPDATE 2020. [http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR Lebanon COVID-19 Update - 30MAR20.pdf](http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Lebanon%20COVID-19%20Update%20-%2030MAR20.pdf).

- Full coverage of PCR test and treatment of Syrian refugees whether registered with UNHCR or not, based on the recommendations of the Ministry of Health;
- UNHCR has strengthened the hospital and increased the capacity of the intensive care unit;
- Expansion of 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.<sup>23</sup> 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 staff support to expand the capacity of the Ministry of Health's COVID-19 hotline;
- It expanded 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 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.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> UNHCR. Lebanon COVID-19 UPDATE 2020. [http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR Lebanon COVID-19 Update - 16APR20\\_0.pdf](http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Lebanon%20COVID-19%20Update%20-%2016APR20_0.pdf).

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

## Lebanese Government Response

With Syrian refugees suffering from ever-changing policies and violations of their fundamental rights, will the COVID-19 pandemic influence change in 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 against refugees through decisions that restricted and limited their freedom of movement, contributing 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 refugees in the national response plan, UNHCR is responsible for all the costs of treating and examining injured or vulnerable refugees.<sup>25</sup> 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.

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<sup>25</sup> 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>.

The Lebanese government has not taken any measures to 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 security agencies or by local security personnel assigned to UNHCR.

### Intervention in Syrian Refugee Communities

As the Lebanese government began implementing the response plan for the COVID-19 crisis, including refugees in the national plan,

- The General Security has contributed to monitoring and coordination with a number of municipalities and civil society organizations to supervise the sterilization of several Syrian refugee camps and settlements in various Lebanese regions, as a step to protect the society as a whole amid the risk of COVID-19, most notably: Qab Elias, Al Hermel, Al-Kouakh , Aanout, Tall Ma'yan, Al-Ouzai camp, Zahrani-Sarfand, al-Khodor.<sup>26</sup> In Al-Hermel in the northern Bekaa, the municipality, in cooperation with civil society organizations, sprayed homes and camps with disinfectants and sterilizers
- The Lebanese government has pledged not to arrest or deport Syrian refugees for not holding valid residency in the case they go to test for COVID-19;
- General 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;<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> غ.خ. 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>.

<sup>27</sup> ل.خ. الامن العام ينشئ خلايا في المحافظات للحد من انتشار الكورونا في مخيمات النازحين. الوكالة الوطنية للإعلام 2020. <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/469352/nna-leb.gov.lb/ar>.

- The General Directorate of General Security announced the possibility of Syrian refugees renewing residencies expired as of March 11, 2020 after the end of the mobilization period without incurring delay fees;<sup>28</sup>
- A large number of tenants in the Bekaa town of Gaza have been exempted from rental fees in cooperation with town residents;
- Some organizations have distributed aid to Syrian refugees in several areas in cooperation with municipalities. In the municipality of Daraya in Al-Chouf, food rations were distributed to 10 Syrian families due to their urgent need; and
- The Ministry of Social Affairs developed a preemptive 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 all Syrian refugee camp residents and providing them with cleaning and disinfecting materials, in cooperation with UNHCR.<sup>29</sup>

ACHR welcomes the initiative of the Lebanese State to sterilize the camps and settlements 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 sterilized camps is very low compared to the number of camps spread across Lebanese territory, in addition to the ineffectiveness of this sterilization in combating the spread of the virus.

<sup>28</sup> 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>.

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

## Human Rights Violations against Syrian refugees

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

Eight municipalities issued a curfew exclusively for Syrian refugees, not including Lebanese citizens, before the government declared a state of general mobilization, while at least 21 municipalities imposed crippling restrictions on Syrian refugees limiting their movement and making it difficult for them to access basic services. Some municipalities adopted discriminatory decisions regarding curfew, where Syrian refugees were banned from leaving their homes or hosting any guests, these include the municipality of Al-Bireh, Hrar, and the municipalities of Rachaya district.<sup>30</sup> Some municipalities, such as The Municipality of Brital, have also placed these restrictions threatening legal action against violators of these decisions and promising to confiscate their identity papers. In Bar Elias, refugees are required to appoint a specific representative to purchase and secure the basic needs of the camps after coordinating with the municipality.<sup>31</sup> The municipality of Bziza threatened Syrian refugees with deportation without warning has banned deportation without warning if the curfew is not respected.<sup>32</sup>

In the Bekaa region, all roads leading to the settlement of at least 10 camps have been closed with only one road left open, where a local security checkpoint was assigned by the municipalities, preventing refugees from leaving the vicinity of their camps, even to purchase basic necessities. They are also required to obtain travel permits from municipalities which is challenging due to the security checkpoint (One

<sup>30</sup> خطة الطوارئ بدأت والبلديات تراقب التنفيذ استنفار الشرطة وحملات رش وتقييم. المركزية 2020

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

<sup>32</sup> بلدية بزيّا: سنرخل أي نازح لا يلتزم بالتعليمات الوقائية. LBCI Lebanon 2020. <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/d/lebanon/507642/بلدية-بزيّا-اسنرخل-أي-نازح-لا-يلتزم-بالتعليمات-الوقائية>.

of the crippling restrictions imposed by some municipalities), while Lebanese citizens are not required to obtain permission from the municipality.<sup>33</sup>

With these crippling conditions, municipalities in Qaabrine, Kfarmelki, Mqaitaa and Tal Hayat have recently recruited an additional 20 local security personnel from the municipalities of those areas to guard 180 Syrian refugee camps, where municipal police has closed the entrances to the camps and left one entrance for use for "utmost necessity."<sup>34</sup>

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 UNHCR registration papers and legal residency papers were searched. They also conducted a census of the camp population to confirm any changes in the number of residents and even beat those responsible for the families.<sup>35</sup>

Some municipalities have taken decisions to evict 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 helping the municipality implement the general mobilization decision and demanded that the municipality deport the family.<sup>36</sup> Also, Gaza municipality in the western Bekaa took a decision to completely vacate Camp 011, which includes about 60 families, after a bloody clash between the Lebanese residents of the area on one hand and the Syrian refugees in the camp on the other hand, but the Ministry of Interior rejected this decision and the municipality reconciliated the two parties to resolve the conflict.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> استمرار التضييق على اللاجئين السوريين في لبنان بظل أزمة كوفيد-19. مركز وصول لحقوق الإنسان 2020. <https://www.achrighs.org/ar/2020/04/15/10772/>.

<sup>34</sup> شراء علبة بنادول يتسبب بفتح تحقيق بلدي وطرد عائلة: اللاجئون السوريون عالقون بين كورونا والعوز. المفكرة القانونية 2020. <https://www.legal-agenda.com/article.php?id=6663>.

<sup>35</sup> استمرار التضييق على اللاجئين السوريين في لبنان بظل أزمة كوفيد-19. مركز وصول لحقوق الإنسان 2020. <https://www.achrighs.org/ar/2020/04/15/10772/>.

<sup>36</sup> شراء علبة بنادول يتسبب بفتح تحقيق بلدي وطرد عائلة: اللاجئون السوريون عالقون بين كورونا والعوز. المفكرة القانونية 2020. <https://www.legal-agenda.com/article.php?id=6663>.

<sup>37</sup> صدامات وجرحى بالبقاع: كورونا يضاعف النعرات ضد اللاجئين السوريين. Almodon 2020. <https://www.almodon.com/society/2020/4/17/اللاجئين-السوريين-ضد-النعرات-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 discriminate between refugees and citizens, and to remove restrictions placed by municipalities exclusively on refugees;
- Consider the importance of the Lebanese government giving an official and public speech requesting Lebanese citizens 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 given 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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