

Lebanese insistence on “voluntary” return despite the security risks in Syria.

Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR) regularly reviews the latest development in Syrian refugees' human rights conditions in Lebanon. ACHR's weekly news aims to inform public opinion on the situation of human rights in the country and make the information accessible to Civil Society organizations, donor entities, and decision-makers. These bulletins are followed by monthly reports, regularly published on ACHR's website.

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The Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) decided to suspend afternoon classes for non-Lebanese students in public schools, pursuing the principle of “equality.” This decision came amid the public sector teachers’ global strike due to the government’s shortfall in paying public school employees.

The Lebanese MEHE’s announcement comes after **a series of governmental pressures on Syrian students.** In September 2022, the Minister of Education in the Lebanese caretaker government, Abbas al-Halabi, said that his government **“will not borrow money to educate non-Lebanese,”** This statement was made during a meeting with international donors to determine the educational sector’s needs to launch the school year.

This decision is a violation of the right to education, given that the budget for afternoon teachers, dedicated to Syrian refugees’ education, is funded by the UNICEF’s budget and is different from the budget allocated to day-shift teachers, dedicated to Lebanese students, that is spent from the MEHE’s budget within the budget plan of the Lebanese government. Despite this fact, **Syrian students have been prevented from continuing their education.** This is a clear violation of refugee students’ access to education and an additional burden on refugees to push them to return to Syria, where security risks are still imminent and present on all Syrian territories, according to the United Nations reports.

After more than ten years since Syrian refugees’ came to Lebanon due to the armed conflict their country is still witnessing, the head of the patriotic movement and parliament deputy Gebran Bassil stated that the Syrian refugee crisis is a “long-term entity crisis,” asking the international community to “stop pressuring Lebanon, financing the displaced and making them scared of returning to their land.” He also recommended that the international community finance their “safe return.”

According to the “Al Jadeed” channel, on the 15th of this January, **members of the Lebanese army handed over a group of refugees to Syrian Security** after they had tried to enter Lebanon illegally through “the Western bridge” crossing in Wadi Khaled in Akkar. Since the beginning of the year, according to what was documented by ACHR, members of the army have carried out deportations of nearly 200 Syrian refugees, despite the international reports confirming that Syria is still not safe.

It is essential to mention that these governmental statements come in parallel to the ongoing internal displacement, which continues on a large scale in Syria, where the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees registered **6.9 million internally displaced persons in all Syrian regions,** 14.6 million Syrians in need of humanitarian aid, a 9 % increase from 2021, and 76 % of families in Syria unable to meet their basic needs.

As part of the systematic hate speech in Lebanon against the refugees, Bassil encouraged his government to **continue implementing the "safe return" plan to Syria,** even though the most recent report of the “Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria” confirmed that “Syria is still not safe.” In addition, ACHR has previously published reports that include statements and information about refugee returnees’ situation in Syria and the circumstances that Syrian refugees face in Lebanon, which pushes them to return to their country.