



URGENT STATEMENT

UNHCR MUST ACCEPT ITS RESPONSIBILITIES RELATING TO HANDING OVER REFUGEE DATA TO THE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT

4 DECEMBER 2023
LEBANON – BEIRUT

On November 24, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) issued a follow-up to its August notice, confirming a data-sharing agreement with the Lebanese government. The update emphasized the immediate implementation of the agreement and clarified that the UNHCR would not directly share "specific personal information." However, the update lacked critical details, including the nature of the information to be shared and the transparent disclosure of the agreement's terms. Consequently, it fell short in reassuring refugees by reaffirming their consent to the sharing of their data.

The Lebanese government has consistently affirmed its commitment to the principle of non-refoulement and adherence to international and local legal obligations, as highlighted in various statements. Notably, caretaker Foreign Minister Bou Habib reasserted this commitment on August 8 during discussions with a UNHCR delegation on refugee data. Despite these assurances, the government's actions have not aligned with its stated commitment, as evidenced by ongoing cases of forced deportation documented by the Access Center for Human Rights (ACHR). Moreover, the government did not engage the UNHCR in the "voluntary return" operations initiated in October 2022 to ensure voluntariness of the refugees' return.

ACHR documented **1027** cases of arbitrary detention of refugees from the beginning of 2023 until November 30. Out of these, **761** were forcibly deported by Lebanese authorities. This brings the cumulative number of refugees forcibly deported and registered with ACHR to **1,007** over the past five years. Among the cases documented were civil activists, politicians and Syrian army defectors, some of whom suffered serious violations in Syria, with the fate of some remaining unknown.

It should be noted that ACHR has collaborated with the UNHCR for four years, referring cases believed to be under the threat of forcible deportation. The Commission, however, was unable to prevent multiple decisions by Lebanon's General Directorate of General Security to deport Syrian refugees that were forcibly detained without judicial reference. This underscores the UNHCR's limitations in ensuring Lebanon's compliance with the non-refoulement principle and its inability to ensure a dignified and safe environment for refugees returning to Syria.

As a human rights institution, we emphasize the importance of implementing protective measures for refugees facing the risk of forced deportation, particularly when there is a concern that returnees may be subjected to arrest, torture or other forms of cruel and degrading treatment. We condemn any actions by the Lebanese authorities that may exacerbate these risks for individuals returning to Syria and call upon the UNHCR to fulfill its responsibilities in cases where the Lebanese government violates its commitment to the non-refoulement principle as outlined in the agreement. We also call upon the UNHCR to publicly and transparently disclose the terms of the agreement, specifying the nature of the information that will be shared with the General Directorate of General Security.