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Lebanon: End discrimination against Palestinian refugees

(Beirut) The Lebanese government must take concrete steps to end all forms of discrimination against Palestinian refugees and to fully protect and uphold their human rights, Amnesty International said in a new report launched at a press conference in Beirut today.

The new report, *Exiled and Suffering: Palestinian refugees in Lebanon*, examines the wide range of restrictions that continue to impact on the lives of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees, 60 years after they or their parents or grandparents fled to Lebanon during the events surrounding the creation of the state of Israel and the Arab-Israeli war of 1948.

"We urge the Lebanese government to take immediate measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination against Palestinian refugees in order to enable them to exercise their economic, social and cultural rights on the same basis as the rest of the population of Lebanon," said Amnesty International. "The continuing restrictions which deny Palestinian refugees access to their rights to work, education and adequate housing and health are wholly unjustified and should be lifted without further procrastination or delay."

More than half of the 300,000 Palestinian refugees who reside in Lebanon live in 12 official Palestinian refugee camps. The area of land allocated for these camps has remained largely unchanged since 1948 despite significant population growth. In some households, families of 10 share a single room. They continue to be denied the right to adequate housing, due to unacceptable levels of habitability, restrictions on property ownership and, in camps in the south of Lebanon, unreasonable restrictions which have been imposed on their right to repair or improve their homes. Amnesty International has documented cases of Palestinian refugees being intimidated, fined and detained simply for seeking to build a brick wall to protect their home from the elements.

Palestinians continue to suffer discrimination and marginalization in the labour market which contribute to high levels of unemployment, low wages and poor working conditions. While the Lebanese authorities recently lifted a ban on 50 of the 70 jobs restricted to them, Palestinians continue to face obstacles in actually finding employment in them. The lack of adequate employment prospects leads a high drop-out rate for Palestinian schoolchildren who also have limited access to public secondary education. The resultant poverty is exacerbated by restrictions placed on their access to social services.

"We recognize that the Lebanese authorities and people have accommodated hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees for almost six decades and the significant cost – economically and in other ways – this has imposed on Lebanon. We recognize also that the responsibility for the suffering of Palestinian refugees extends beyond Lebanon and lies also with Israel and the international community, which has, for nearly 60 years, failed to find a durable solution for the plight of Palestinian refugees or to adequately protect their rights as refugees," Amnesty International said. However, the Lebanese government has the obligation to immediately end all forms of discrimination against Palestinian refugees and fully respect their human rights.

In its report, Amnesty International acknowledges that the current Lebanese government has gone further than its predecessors in addressing the restrictions which limit Palestinian refugees' rights, including by easing restrictions on efforts to improve housing conditions. As well, the government has indicated its interest in finding a solution for so-called non-ID Palestinians – an estimated 3,000-5,000 refugees who are

not registered with either the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) or the Lebanese authorities, and whose conditions are the most precarious.

Amnesty International is also calling on the international community to make all necessary efforts to find a durable solution for Palestinian refugees that fully respects and protects their human rights, including their right of return, including providing financial and technical assistance to Lebanon to enable it to extend the highest possible level of human rights protection to its Palestinian refugee population.

"The international community must also provide technical and financial assistance to Lebanon to enable it to extend the highest possible level of enjoyment of human rights protection to its refugee population," said Amnesty International. "This should include responding favourably to the Lebanese authorities' 10 September appeal for funds to rebuild Nahr al-Bared camp - heavily damaged earlier this year in fighting between members of an extremist armed group and the Lebanese army - and surrounding areas, and ensuring that UNRWA has the necessary funding and mandate to effectively provide for the needs of Palestinian refugees."

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