

Public

AI Index: MDE 21/021/2007
Distribution: PG/SC



To: Health Professional Network
From: Health and Human Rights Team
Date: 12 October 2007

Health Professional Action

Exiled and suffering: Palestinian refugees in Lebanon

For further information see: report *Exiled and Suffering: Palestinian refugees in Lebanon*, AI Index: MDE 18/010/2007 – Embargoed until 17 October 2007.

Summary:

Around 300,000 Palestinian refugees reside in Lebanon. They are one of the world's most long-established refugee populations and they remain in a form of limbo, subject to various restrictions in the host country Lebanon, where they are denied access to their full range of human rights. These include the guarantee of access to minimum essential levels of adequate health care, at the very least, for Palestinian refugees, both registered and non-ID without discrimination.

Background:

Most Palestinian refugees in Lebanon were expelled or otherwise fled Mandate Palestine nearly 60 years ago in the events surrounding the creation of the state of Israel and the Arab-Israeli war of 1948, or are descendants of those who did. Around 53 percent, live in war-torn, decaying and poverty-stricken camps. They have virtually no prospect in the foreseeable future of being allowed to return to their lands and homes located primarily in what is now Israel, and to a much smaller extent in the Israeli-Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), despite having a well-established right to return under international law. They also remain subject to various restrictions in the host country, Lebanon, where they are denied access to their full range of human rights, even though most of them were born and raised in Lebanon.

Much of the discriminatory treatment Palestinians face – including restrictions on access to health care - is rooted in their statelessness, which has been used by the Lebanese authorities to deny them equal rights not only with the Lebanese population but also with other foreign residents of Lebanon.

Lack of registration:

There are around 3,000-5,000 non-ID Palestinian refugees who are not registered with the Lebanese authorities or the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Children of non-ID fathers are also denied recognition as registered Palestinian refugees. The non-ID Palestinian refugees face severe restrictions of their human rights, such as the right to be registered after birth, the right to have a name, to have a nationality, to have marriage registration, to education and freedom of movement. They are also not officially entitled to UNRWA's services, although sometimes can access them informally.

Denial of the right to health:

The obligation of the authorities to respect, protect and fulfil the right to health of many of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is being breached as evidenced by the poor health care available in practice to them. Most refugees can not afford the expensive medical treatment provided in Lebanese health facilities. UNRWA partially covers the medical treatment of registered Palestinian refugees but not at all for others. Secondary healthcare is rarely subsidized. Palestinian camps and gatherings suffer from a shortage of health workers, health facilities and equipment.

Most recent events:

Periodic conflicts and violence in Lebanon and in the region have worsened the plight of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, including the Lebanese civil war between 1975 and 1990, Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon followed by its occupation of the south until 2000, and the Israeli-Hizbullah conflict in 2006. The desperate plight of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon was thrown into the international spotlight from 20 May 2007, when fighting which began in Tripoli, north Lebanon, spread to the nearby Nahr al-Bared camp. The clashes were between members of Fatah al-Islam, an Islamist armed group that had recently moved into the camp and established armed positions within it, thereby putting the security of the local population at risk, and the Lebanese army forces. At least 23 Palestinian civilians and scores of others were injured in the first 12 days of the fighting¹, which witnessed some heavy and possibly indiscriminate artillery shelling by the Lebanese army. Fighting continued for 15 weeks until 2 September, when the Lebanese armed forces seized control of the camp. The battle resulted in the deaths of 166 Lebanese army soldiers and 220 Fatah al-Islam militants, according to the Lebanese authorities, and at least 42 civilians. The camp was largely destroyed. The conflict caused the displacement of some 30,000 Palestinian refugees from Nahr al-Bared; most of these relocated to the Beddawi Palestinian refugee camp about 15 km away. There they took up shelter in schools, empty shops, and abandoned buildings and in houses of the local refugee population - swelling the camp and putting extra strain on its infrastructure.

Obligations of Lebanese authorities and international community:

Amnesty International recognizes that the Lebanese authorities have accommodated hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees and the significant cost – economically and in other ways – this has imposed on Lebanon. It also recognizes that the responsibility for the suffering of Palestinian refugees goes beyond Lebanon and lies also with the international community, which has, for nearly 60 years, excluded Palestinians from the international system established to protect refugees. Israel and the international community have also failed to find an adequate, durable and sustainable solution, consistent with international law, to the problems of the millions of Palestinian refugees scattered around the world.

Why campaign now?

The current Lebanese government has shown greater interest than its predecessors in seeking to improve the conditions of the Palestinian refugees. It has taken welcomed

¹ Palestinian Red Crescent Society, 31 May 2007

initiatives such as relaxing some of the restrictions placed on Palestinian refugees' access to jobs by lifting the ban on 50 professions, engaging in efforts to improve housing conditions, and expressing interest in resolving the issue of non-ID Palestinians whose conditions are the most precarious.

In view of the Nahr al-Bared clashes the desperate plight of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon was thrown again into the international spotlight, while at least some sections of the Lebanese society and government became more receptive to a possible improvement in the socio-economic conditions of the Palestinian refugees.

This action will run from 17 October 2007 until 31 May 2008.

Recommended Action: Please write in Arabic, French, English or your own language to the Minister of Health.

- Introduce yourself as a health professional concerned about the denial of the poor health care available to Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.
- State that AI:
 - recognizes the efforts made by the Lebanese authorities over the past six decades to accommodate hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees and the cost – economically and in other ways – which this has imposed on Lebanon and its people.
 - recognizes that the responsibility for the suffering of Palestinian refugees goes beyond Lebanon, suffering that is rooted in the Palestinian exodus of 1948.
 - recognizes the important steps taken by the current Lebanese authority to ameliorate the conditions of the Palestinian refugees, by relaxing some of the restrictions on Palestinian refugees' access to the local labour market, engaging in efforts to improve housing conditions, and expressing an interest in finding a solution for non-ID Palestinians.
- Urge the Lebanese government to guarantee Palestinian refugees' right to adequate health by taking effective steps to ensure that minimum essential levels of healthcare, at the very least, are afforded to everyone in Lebanon, including registered and non-ID Palestinian refugees.

Address:

His Excellency Muhammad Khalifeh

Minister of Health

Ministry of Health

Rue de Musée

Beirut

Lebanon

Fax: + 961 1 645 099

615 711

<http://www.public-health.gov.lb/ind.shtml>