

[Title]

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon

Six decades of exile and suffering

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”Today, all 12 official refugee camps in [Lebanon] suffer from serious problems – no proper infrastructure, overcrowding, poverty and unemployment. [Lebanon] has the highest percentage of Palestine refugees who are living in abject poverty and who are registered with the Agency's ‘special hardship’ programme.”

UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA),
2007

Several hundred thousand Palestinian refugees live in Lebanon, mostly in awful conditions, almost 60 years after they and their forebears were expelled or fled from their lands. Their appalling social and economic conditions demonstrate forcefully the failure of successive governments in Israel and Lebanon, and of the wider international community, to respect and protect their rights or find a sustainable and just solution to their plight during the past six decades.

Palestinian refugees constitute one of the world’s most long-established refugee populations and they remain in limbo. They have virtually no prospect in the foreseeable future of being allowed to return to the lands and homes from which they fled in Mandate Palestine, even though they have a well established right to return under international law.

For Palestinians in Lebanon, the pain associated with their expulsion and the decades of living in exile is being aggravated by systematic discrimination against them. Their statelessness has been used by the Lebanese authorities to deny them equal rights with Lebanese nationals and other non-Lebanese nationals. The life is being choked out of their communities, forcing the young and healthy to seek jobs abroad and condemning the rest to a daily struggle for survival.

Housing

“Our generation, where are we going to live? There is no place in the camp and we cannot own property outside.”

Qassem Muhammad Hammadi, aged 21, from Burj el-Barajneh camp near Beirut, where around 15,000 refugees live

Most Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have had little choice but to live in overcrowded and deteriorating camps and informal “gatherings” – unofficial camps that lack basic infrastructure. The land allocated to official refugee camps has barely changed since 1948, despite a fourfold increase in the number of registered refugees.

Residents have been banned from bringing building materials into some camps, preventing the repair, expansion or improvement of homes, although recently there has been some relaxation of the ban. Those who defy the law face fines and imprisonment as well as demolition of new structures.

The addition of rooms or floors to existing buildings in some camps has meant that the alleyways have become even narrower, the majority of homes receive no direct sunlight and, despite the best efforts of the inhabitants, the pervasive smell of sewage is at times overwhelming.

A resident of Burj el-Barajneh camp told Amnesty International:

“There is no privacy. There is no view, neither of the sea nor of the mountains. There is not space for children to play. We [only] have the right to dream about these things.”

In Burj el-Shemali camp near Tyre, home to more than 18,000 people, families live almost exclusively in corrugated iron huts, without ventilation or sanitation. The “zinco” houses are excessively hot in summer, too cold in winter.

In Nahr el-Bared camp near Tripoli, a family told Amnesty International that their baby had died in the summer heat after being left in the main room. The room was made entirely of zinc sheeting. In 2007, the camp was largely destroyed in fighting between members of an armed group and the Lebanese army.

The ghettoization of Palestinians is intensified by the constant military presence around the camps in southern Lebanon. Each time refugees want to leave or return to their homes, they have to pass a Lebanese army checkpoint and show their documents, reinforcing a perception that they are outsiders and a potential threat, rather than refugees in need of protection.

Most Palestinians are also vulnerable to threats and arbitrary eviction because they have no security of tenure. A formal, administrative system for registering legal title to housing operates in the official camps, but not in the gatherings. Outside the camps, Lebanese law prohibits people who do “not carry a citizenship issued by a recognized state” – overwhelmingly Palestinians – from owning housing and land in Lebanon. The law also prevents Palestinian refugees from inheriting housing or land, and from registering real estate, even if they have been paying for it in instalments for years.

Work

“Even if we get an education, we are not allowed to get a [good] job.”

A 27-year-old woman in El-Maachouk settlement near Tyre

Restrictions in the labour market mean high levels of unemployment, low wages and poor working conditions for Palestinians. Until recently, more than 70 professions were barred to Palestinians – around 20 still are, including law, medicine and engineering. This and other discriminatory treatment compounds the poverty and

isolation of Palestinians in Lebanon.

In Lebanon, Lebanese nationals enjoy preferential treatment over non-Lebanese nationals in terms of access to employment, as is the pattern for nationals in most countries. This differentiation in Lebanon extends to non-nationals who were born or have lived most or all of their life in the country, most notably Palestinian refugees.

It can be difficult and expensive for a Palestinian to obtain a work permit, and even when permits are issued, they must be renewed annually. The complicated permit requirements mean that employers rarely seek them for Palestinian refugees or other non-nationals. Companies tend to employ Palestinians in low paid jobs that do not require a work permit, such as construction work or cleaning. Sometimes, Palestinians are employed in jobs that officially require a work permit although they do not have one, in which case they do not enjoy the benefits and protection of a contract and are usually paid less than their Lebanese counterparts. Even when Palestinians obtain work permits, they still do not qualify to receive benefits from the social security system to which they are required to contribute by paying taxes.

In addition, Palestinians and non-nationals are not allowed to join professional associations, a requirement for working in those professions.

Sa'id from Burj el-Barajneh told Amnesty International:

“I work as a driver. To be a driver you need a public licence, which is different from a private licence and cannot be obtained by Palestinians because you must be part of the drivers' syndicate, which is barred to Palestinians. So I am working illegally. How can you ask for your rights when you are working illegally?”

Poor health care and education

Medical treatment is expensive in Lebanon and only partially covered by UNRWA for registered Palestinian refugees and not at all for others. Secondary health care is rarely subsidized at all. A shortage of health workers, health facilities and equipment in the camps and gatherings where Palestinians live compounds the poor health care available in practice to refugees.

Palestinians also suffer as a result of poor education services available to them and the lack of job prospects even if they manage to receive a good education. As a result, many leave school at a young age to work as rag pickers (sorting through rubbish) or other work that leaves them open to exploitation and abuse.

Lebanese law specifies that only Lebanese children have a right to free primary education. This violates international law that Lebanon has promised to respect, law that obliges states to provide free and compulsory primary education without discrimination on the basis of children's status as refugees or asylum-seekers, any other legal status, or the status of their parents or guardians.

Urgent action needed

Amnesty International recognizes the efforts made by the Lebanese authorities to accommodate hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees for decades. It also recognizes that the responsibility for the suffering of Palestinian refugees goes beyond Lebanon, which is rooted in the Palestinian exodus of 1948 and the denial of their right to return.

Many Palestinian refugees in Lebanon retain the hope that one day they will be able to return to their homes in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. However, until that time, Lebanon must respect, protect and fulfil the rights of Palestinian refugees within its jurisdiction.

To this end, the Lebanese authorities should:

- urgently repeal or revise all laws and policies that directly discriminate against Palestinian refugees;
- take immediate steps to improve conditions in the camps and gatherings;
- register all non-ID Palestinian refugees under Lebanese jurisdiction without delay;
- end the discrimination facing Palestinians in the labour market;
- ensure that adequate health care is available to all;
- ensure that all children have equal access to education.

In accordance with the principle of international co-operation and burden and responsibility-sharing, Amnesty International also urges the international community to 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.

[Photo caption]

Building extensions block the sunlight in the alleyways of Ein el-Hilweh camp, Sidon Saida, March 2005

[End of photo caption]

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We research, campaign, advocate and mobilize to end all abuses of human rights – civil, political, social, cultural and economic. From freedom of expression and association to physical and mental integrity, from protection from discrimination to the right to shelter – these rights are indivisible.

Amnesty International is independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion. Our work is largely financed by contributions from our membership and donations.

More information on Lebanon and Palestinian refugees can be obtained at www.amnesty.org

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