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Written statement* submitted by The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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The Ongoing Human Rights Violations of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon

Out of the roughly 800,00 to 935,000 Palestinians that were displaced as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, around 80,000 became refugees in Lebanon. As of January 2016, the number of refugees registered with UNRWA in Lebanon was 458,369.¹ Over half of the refugee population (62%) live in the 12 recognised refugee camps in Lebanon, whilst the remaining 38% live in informal gatherings, mainly centred within the vicinity of the camps but also in various towns and cities across the country.²

Despite their longstanding presence in Lebanon, Palestinian refugees do not benefit from key aspects of social, political and economic life in the country. In fact, Lebanon has the highest percentage of Palestinian refugees living in extreme poverty.³ Because Lebanon is not a signatory of the 1951 U.N. Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol, it does not recognize the basic rights and legal obligations to people with refugee status, and the pre-Syrian crisis refugee population therefore suffers from limited rights and restricted access to public services and employment in the country.

For example, Palestinians face key legal restrictions that limit their rights, and they have very constrained access to state-provided services such as healthcare and education. Furthermore, because Palestinians who emigrated from outside Lebanon are stateless, they do not enjoy the rights given to other foreigners who hold citizenship from another country either.

An example of how such restrictions significantly diminish Palestinian quality of life can be demonstrated by the checkpoints in place which restrict access to most of the camps, thus thwarting trade opportunities and commerce with neighbouring communities. Legal issues such as these force the majority of the camps' population to become completely dependent on UNRWA and other organisations – both local and international - for everything from schools to humanitarian assistance.

Within the official camps, UNRWA provide housing, water, electricity, education, healthcare as well as some additional welfare services to Palestinians. Although a total of 46 Arab organizations and 20 foreign NGOs assist Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, the volume and scope of their assistance pales in comparison to services delivered by UNRWA. This aid, regardless of its source, is indispensable as the Lebanese government does not provide any kind of social safety net for Palestinians living in Lebanon.

160,000 (two-thirds) of the total Palestinian refugee population are considered either poor or extremely poor.⁴ In 2015, it was reported that 40% of households are considered food insecure and 20% severely so.⁵ In addition to this, 81.3% of refugee households report at least one family member suffering from a chronic illness and 10% report one family member suffering some form of functional disability.⁶ In terms of education, it is important to note the rising percentage of Palestinian children dropping out of school early. This severely affects refugees' already-diminished chances of employment, which consequently increases levels of poverty. Housing quality continues to be a problem in communities where Palestinian refugees live in Lebanon with a staggering 40% of households reporting water leakages as well as other issues.⁷

Palestinian Refugees from Syria (PRS) living in Lebanon

¹ https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/unrwa_in_figures_2016.pdf

² <http://www.unrwa.org/userfiles/2011012074253.pdf>

³ <http://www.anera.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/LEBRefugeeReport.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.unrwa.org/userfiles/2011012074253.pdf>

⁵ <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0130724>

⁶ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=11305>

⁷ <http://www.palestineconomy.ps/page.php?id=4bb0ay310026Y4bb0a>

The conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic has significantly contributed to the plight of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, with the country becoming the largest per capita recipient of refugees in the world.⁸ The escalating violence has made movement and access more difficult and has led Lebanon to effectively close its borders to PRS in May of 2014.

As of May 2016, there were 40, 739 PRS recorded as residing in Lebanon and their arrival has not spared its existing Palestinian refugee gatherings and camps which already suffer from significant overcrowding and dire living conditions.⁹ Half of PRS are settled in the 12 camps throughout Lebanon and the remaining 45.2% live in gatherings located in fringe areas around the camps and across the country.¹⁰

PRS suffer from the same legal restrictions as PRL, as well as additional restrictions that apply only to them. For instance, the Lebanese government has placed new requirements that essentially restrict PRS' ability to renew their temporary residency visas, leaving them without any clear legal status in the country and put them at risk of arrest and deportation.

The economic status of PRS is extremely critical, with an unemployment rate of 52.5% as of 2017.¹¹ Food security is also a major issue; 90% of the PRS population is considered to be food insecure.¹² In 2015, it is reported that 83% of PRS families had at least one member suffering from a chronic condition and 70% of families reported at least one member with an acute illness within the past six months.¹³

As of 2015, 74% of families have at least one child who is not attending school, and many Syrian children have bore witness to traumatic violence in Syria and therefore suffer from psychological consequences. The two main concerns with housing is that PRS live in extremely overcrowded environments yet are still required to pay expensive rent, something which the majority of families simply cannot afford. This financial insecurity causes PRS to face exploitation, makes them vulnerable to abuse and forces them to turn to child labour, child marriage and smuggling.¹⁴

Conclusions and recommendations:

UNRWA's work is vital for the survival of PRL and PRS. However, the recent agency's funding crisis is severely affecting refugees' lives. Although UNRWA should continue to support Palestinian refugees, the lack of funding at UNRWA distracts from the wider issue: the lack of a political solution that leaves Palestinian refugees vulnerable. Israel cannot remain indifferent to the plight of the Palestinian refugees, to which it is directly responsible for, having caused their expulsion during the 1948 War and then subsequently denied them the right of return. The international community should therefore pressure Israel to abide to international law and to work towards an appropriate solution for Palestinian refugees. Any solution should be based on international law and United Nations Resolutions that guarantee the Palestinian right of return.

The Palestinian Return Centre calls on Mr. President and the Distinguished Members of the Council to:

- Put pressure on the Lebanese government to respect the articles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and comply with international law rules and norms.
- Support the Lebanese government, which is already coping with a refugee crisis

⁸ <http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ena/wfp269259.pdf>

⁹ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/116246/DOSSIER%20-%20CONT%20Mission%20to%20Jordan%20and%20Lebanon,%2020-23%20September%202016.pdf>

¹⁰ https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/2017_syria_emergency_appeal.pdf

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=11305>

¹⁴ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/116246/DOSSIER%20-%20CONT%20Mission%20to%20Jordan%20and%20Lebanon,%2020-23%20September%202016.pdf>

- Advocate for the Palestinian Refugees' right to decent work, to ensure that refugees' rights are improved and applied, and that an improved understanding of existing rights amongst both refugees and employers is on place.
 - Help UNRWA in its support for Palestinian refugees (especially providing better food security, housing conditions, education and health assistance) until an appropriate solution is implemented.
 - Demand that the Lebanese authorities drop the discriminatory requirements imposed on PRS which are increasing the vulnerability of refugees and contravene international law.
 - In line with the UN SDGs the international community should act to eradicate poverty from Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.
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