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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

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.

[6 February 2022]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only. The views expressed in the present document do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its officials.



The Humanitarian Impact of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) Aid Cut on Palestinian Refugees from Syria (PRS) in Lebanon

Overview

The Syrian conflict, entering now its 11th year, has had a heavy toll on the Palestinian refugee community living in the war-torn country. Thousands of refugees have fled to neighboring Lebanon seeking safer shelters and better economic opportunities.

UN data indicates that 29,000 Palestinian refugees from the Syrian Arab Republic (5,800 households) are currently sheltered in Lebanon, down from nearly 84,000 in previous years. 85% of PRS in Lebanon live on sporadic aid handed over to them by UNRWA.¹

This has increased pressure on UNRWA services, which include cash and food aid, employment, schools and vocational training centres, health clinics and women's centres. Following the Trump administration's withdrawal of funding for UNRWA in 2018, which amounted to approximately one third of its budget, the agency has been under extreme financial pressure at a time when arguably the need for its services has never been greater.²

UNRWA Aid Cut

UNRWA provides PRS families with a monthly multi-purpose cash grant to cover food expenses. However, the funding shortfall has affected UNRWA's ability to maintain its operations and render essential services to PRS.

Starting 2022, UNRWA decided that multi-purpose monthly cash grants of 100 USD to every registered PRS be reduced to 25 USD, resulting in further despair for PRS.

The funding crisis has forced UNRWA to go for drastic austerity and cost-control measures to keep services afloat. This has triggered a mood of distress, boiling despair and hopelessness among the Palestinian refugee community. When the UN agency is struggling financially to deliver the most essential services it creates a deep sense of abandonment.

As the Agency's chief warned in his remarks at the Geneva Executive Briefing in mid-January, "austerity and cost-control measures have reached their limit. Austerity reaches its limit when we put 50 children in a classroom or leave the most deprived children without transportation or stationery. These children will most likely drop out of school. Austerity reaches its limit when a doctor can only spend three minutes with a patient. And austerity reaches its limits when -month after month- the Agency does not know if it will be able to pay the salaries of more than 28,000 staff and, as a direct consequence, critical services to millions of refugees across the region".³

While the current crisis affects everyone in Lebanon, the State of Palestine refugees from the Syrian Arab Republic are enduring particular hardship given their already marginalized status in the country. They are struggling to survive and their needs have increased dramatically, with poverty rates reaching 87 per cent among the PRS.⁴

The situation has been exacerbated by the unprecedented economic and financial crisis currently faced by Lebanon, in what the World Bank characterized as a "deliberate depression" and one of the most severe crises since the mid-nineteenth century. Since October 2019, the Lebanese Pound (LBP) lost more than 90 per cent of its value compared to the US Dollar (US\$) in a country that is highly reliant on imports for the most essential goods including fuel and medication. The majority of PRS have had their purchasing power decline at least threefold.⁵

At the same time, Palestinians in Lebanon do not enjoy several important rights; for example, they cannot work in many professions and cannot own property (real estate). Because they are not formally citizens of another state, the State of Palestine refugees are unable to claim the same rights as other foreigners living and working in Lebanon.

Protest Moves

Dozens of PRS families continue to rally outside of UNRWA headquarters across the Lebanese territories, voicing their firm condemnation of the Agency's decision to cut cash aid.

A so-called sit-in "Tent 194" has been set up outside of the Agency's headquarters in Beirut, in reference to UN Resolution 194 issued by the UN General Assembly on December 11, 1948 resolving that "refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible".⁶

Recommendations

The UNHRC should urge UNRWA to backtrack on the new decision and find alternative channels, rather than austerity, to refresh its annual budget.

UNRWA should rather increase its financial grants for PRS in Lebanon, in light of the dire socio-economic conditions inflicted by the crash of the Lebanese pound and the dramatic price leap.

UNRWA should seek more donors for its annual budget in order to keep up its vital services for vulnerable Palestinian refugees.

The UNHRC should remind UNRWA of its humanitarian mission as mandated by the UN to assist Palestinian refugees in its five fields of operation, including Lebanon.

UNRWA should be called upon to work on the refugees' unconditional return to their homes from which they have been displaced by the Israeli occupation since 1948.

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

2 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/31/trump-to-cut-all-us-funding-for-uns-main-palestinian-refugee-programme>

3 <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/remarks-unrwa-commissioner-general-geneva-executive-briefing>

4 <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/palestine-refugees-lebanon-struggling-survive>

5 <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/emergency-appeals/palestine-refugees-lebanon-struggling-survive>

6 [https://www.unrwa.org/content/resolution-](https://www.unrwa.org/content/resolution-194#:~:text=The%20United%20Nations%20General%20Assembly,not%20to%20return%20and%20of)

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