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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.

[27 May 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Palestinians of the Syrian Arab Republic (PRS) in Lebanon: Ambivalent Legal Status and Refoulement Concerns

Introduction

The humanitarian situation for the approximately 23,000 Palestinian refugees who have fled to Lebanon from the civil war in neighbouring the Syrian Arab Republic is dire.(1)

According to UNRWA, 90% of the 5,500 PRS families seeking refuge in Lebanon are living below the poverty line.(2)

On July 13, 2017, the Lebanese authorities decided to regularize the status of PRS who entered Lebanon before September 16, 2016. Those who entered illegally after that date have been denied residency rights. Consequently, only about 30% of PRS have been able to regularize their status, leaving the majority at risk of forced deportation. Following this decision, the Lebanese authorities have authorized the suspension of all residency permits for PRS and the immediate deportation of those violating residency regulations and those entering the country irregularly.

The Action Group for Palestinians of Syria has documented numerous instances of the arrest and deportation of Palestinian refugees to the Syrian Arab Republic. Notable cases include the deportation of Mustafa al-Khatib and Jihad Muhammad al-Kurdi, a father of three. In some instances, families of detainees have not disclosed the fate of their loved ones over security concerns.(3)

These deportations have increased recently, with 375 individuals registered with AGPS receiving departure cards. Additionally, 436 individuals have been issued entry bans, ranging from one to five years, with some facing permanent bans.

Statistics

A field study conducted by AGPS, encompassing 393 Palestinian-Syrian refugee families in Lebanon, highlights the exacerbation of their suffering due to the inability to obtain legal residency. The authorities treat them as temporary guests rather than granting them refugee status, despite the coercive circumstances that forced them to seek asylum.(4)

The study revealed that in approximately 113 of these families, the head of the household lacks legal residency. Furthermore, 313 out of 1,649 refugees are denied legal residency by the Lebanese authorities, with a significant portion of them being students.

The study also indicated that all targeted families reported that their lack of legal status severely restricts their movement due to fear of arrest. This has forced them to remain confined within the camps and gatherings where they have sought refuge.

These findings underscore the urgent need for measures to ensure the legal protection and mobility of Palestinian-Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

AGPS data indicates that 175 refugees entered Lebanon irregularly, and 150 refugees have had their documents withheld by the Lebanese authorities for many months, leaving their legal status unresolved. Additionally, 75 refugees have been ordered to leave Lebanon.

A significant issue faces young refugees aged 17 or 18, who entered Lebanon as children. Lebanese authorities require them to present personal identification or a passport to renew their residence permits, but they cannot obtain these documents as they are wanted for compulsory military service in the Syrian Arab Republic.

As for access to education, students must present a residence permit to take middle and secondary school exams. This requirement has forced many students to abandon their studies and drop out of school. Statistics indicate that 33 or more students were unable to secure the necessary documents to take these exams because they left the Syrian Arab Republic at an early age.

Many families have had to sell their home furniture or take out loans to pay for document fees. Some members have risked their lives to re-enter the Syrian Arab Republic through irregular crossings to obtain the required documents, as those who leave Lebanon through official border crossings are prevented from returning.

School principals, contacted by AGPS, confirmed that they are required to adhere to the Ministry of Education and Higher Education's conditions for issuing examination cards. This threatens the future of dozens of Palestinian students from the Syrian Arab Republic in Lebanon.

In terms of employment opportunities and access to the labour market, the Lebanese authorities impose restrictions on Palestinian refugees residing in Lebanon and those displaced from the Syrian Arab Republic, preventing them from exercising their right to work under Lebanese labour law, which requires foreigners to obtain a work permit. This legal fragility has led to widespread unemployment among refugees, adversely affecting their ability to secure basic necessities such as housing, food, and heating materials.

Many women have been forced into domestic service to support their families, and these conditions have led to the exploitation of Palestinian refugees by employers, who make them work in difficult or dangerous conditions for low wages.

Recommendations:

The dire humanitarian situation faced by Palestinian refugees who fled war-torn Syrian Arab Republic (the) to Lebanon, coupled with their precarious legal status, presents significant protection and refoulement concerns. These refugees, living in severe poverty and deprived of legal residency, face constant threats of arrest and deportation. The Lebanese authorities' crackdowns and movement restrictions further exacerbate their vulnerability, limiting their access to essential services, education, and employment. This situation violates fundamental human rights and contravenes international protection standards against refoulement.

The Action Group for Palestinians of Syria urges the Lebanese government to reconsider the legal status of Palestinian refugees displaced from the Syrian Arab Republic and to work towards regularizing their situation in a manner that ensures their access to basic rights until the circumstances that forced them to flee the Syrian Arab Republic are resolved.

We call on UNRWA, as the agency directly responsible for protecting Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, to intervene with the Lebanese authorities to halt deportations.

The scope of UNRWA's mandate should be expanded to include providing legal assistance to Palestinian families threatened with deportation and those facing severe challenges with residency and education.

(2) <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees-syria-lebanon>

(3) <https://actionpal.org.uk/en/index.html>

(4) <https://actionpal.org.uk/ar/post/18790>