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Governments must not let the talk of refugee return to Syria mask the need to keep supporting vulnerable people in Lebanon

With all eyes on the small numbers of refugees returning to Syria, the international community gathering today at a high-level EU-hosted meeting on the Syria Crisis at the UN General Assembly must maintain support for the ongoing refugee and host community response in Lebanon in order to help those in need and contribute to Lebanon's stability.

Much of the focus of debate around the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon has this year centered on whether and how refugees can return to Syria. A few thousand people have returned in recent months, while others are still crossing from Syria into Lebanon in search of asylum, often through risky irregular routes. While the conflict in Syria continues without resolution, there is a real risk that if 'return' prematurely becomes the dominant narrative relating to the refugee crisis, it stands to mask the massive ongoing needs of affected populations that we hold a collective responsibility to support. In Lebanon this includes vulnerable Syrians, Lebanese and Palestinians.

Last week, over a hundred thousand Syrian refugees in Lebanon were told that they will no longer receive the cash-based assistance that they rely on and remain uncertain about future support. A similar number of people will be newly included to receive cash-based assistance as a result of a 'targeting' change to ensure the most economically vulnerable households are supported. However, the reality of the situation is that many incredibly vulnerable households will be continuing to go without, as there is just not enough funding for assistance to go round. The majority of families who rely primarily on borrowing in order to cover their basic needs continue to accrue mounting debt, while resort to other negative coping mechanisms including child labour persists. At the start of this school year, formal education for new refugee students - so essential to safeguard future generations - is in question with the government pointing to a lack of assured resources to cover the cost of additional school places. The withdrawal of US funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) that works to support Palestinians across the region has left the continuation of basic services for Palestinians in Lebanon under threat, including healthcare and education.

Surveys conducted by NGOs and UN agencies show that the vast majority of refugees want to go back to Syria; but most of those surveyed consider that it is unlikely they would be able to do so within the next 12 months. The Lebanese government has been clear on its commitment to the principle of *non-refoulement*: it remains essential that no one is forced to return. Humanitarian access challenges across much of Syria and continuing evidence of human rights abuses and poor living conditions means that any organized large scale repatriation of refugees from neighbouring countries would risk being unsustainable and creating yet more internally displaced people, as well as refugee flows back into host countries or onwards to Europe and elsewhere. Currently no framework exists whereby parties in Syria and the mandated international actors can guarantee the voluntariness, safety and dignity of refugee returns in accordance with international law.

The Government of Lebanon and the international community must keep prioritizing the delivery of a response to crisis-affected people that can be sustained while those desperately in need continue to require our help – while also contributing to longer-term development objectives for example relating to

infrastructure improvements and equitable public healthcare provision. A continued response with adequate support from the international community is essential to provide stability and mitigate tensions in Lebanon. Multi-year donor funding – so important to ensure effective planning and delivery of the response – remains limited.

Both the Government of Lebanon and donor governments made important commitments at the Brussels Conference earlier this year that stand to better support vulnerable populations if implemented, including in the areas of education, health and protection. In addition, sizeable pledges of concessional financing for Lebanon were made at the CEDRE Conference. In some areas, however, policy commitments have not led to the hoped-for impact on the ground. For example, despite moves to ease access to residency for refugees, the vast majority of Syrians remain without legal stay, hampering their freedom of movement and access to services – and also complicating their pathway to return to Syria when the time comes. The significant effort required to turn conference promises into action must not be obscured by a focus on refugee return.

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LHIF is a network of international NGOs working to support the needs of vulnerable Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian populations in Lebanon