

Syria Refugee Crisis pushing Lebanon to take concerning steps, aid agencies warn

The Syria refugee crisis is pushing Lebanon to take concerning steps, more than 20 humanitarian agencies warned today. Since 3 May 2014 there have been increasing reports of refugees experiencing difficulties in maintaining residence in Lebanon, and entry for Palestinian refugees from Syria seeking safety and protection in Lebanon has all but ceased.

On World Refugee Day, the Lebanon Humanitarian INGO Forum (LHIF) said that Lebanon needs greater support from international donors to provide for refugees and host communities before the situation becomes untenable. LHIF also urged all countries neighboring Syria to ensure that their borders are open to all civilians fleeing the conflict, regardless of national status.

Lebanon now hosts more refugees per capita than any other country in the world – one out of every five people living in the country is a refugee. But with over 1 million refugees already in the country and thousands more arriving every month, only a quarter of the funds needed to provide essential services for refugees and host communities in Lebanon in 2014 have so far been received.

“The Lebanese people and government have done far more than any other country to provide a safe haven for the millions fleeing conflict in Syria. This life saving action has to continue. By denying entry to civilians, vulnerable populations may be stuck inside Syria or forced to cross borders at unofficial points, through insecure areas affected by cross-border shelling and mines” said Niamh Murnaghan, Country Director for the Norwegian Refugee Council in Lebanon.

A lack of clarity for refugees over their status is leading to increased fear and inhibiting their ability to access services. Many refugees who are living unofficially in Lebanon are already unable to move freely, too afraid to access legal protection or aid, and are at risk of exploitation.

Increased support for Lebanon from the international community is critical. *“For many refugees, crossing a border is the only means of survival. Syria’s neighbors have an obligation to keep their borders open to refugees, but they need more help. We urgently need to see an increase in solutions offered by other states to ensure effective refugee protection including funding, resettlement and humanitarian admissions”* said Médecins du Monde’s General Coordinator for Lebanon, Baptiste Hanquart.

Note to Editors:

- May 8th: A Ministry of Interior (Mol) circular was published announcing temporary closure of Lebanese borders to PRS for security reasons (<http://www.unrwa.org/prs-lebanon>). Some PRS have been allowed to enter since, but the majority of these are individuals who are transiting through Lebanon or are attending specific appointments (e.g., Embassy appointments).
- June 1st: An Mol circular was published warning Syrian refugees that if they travel to Syria after June 1st 2014, the Government of Lebanon will no longer consider them as refugees(<http://www.nna-leb.gov.lb/en/show-news/27598/Interior-Ministry-Syrian-refugees-are-to-refrain-from-entering-Syria-as-of-Sunday-under-penalty-of-losing-their-refugee-status>). On June 2nd 2014, the special ministerial committee established by the Lebanese Council of Ministers to pursue issues specific to the Syrian refugee community supported the Mol declaration and clarified that the GSO “will be notified not to consider any Syrian citizen as a displaced person if he/she is coming from a safe place in Syria.”
- There is currently a freeze on visa renewals for PRS, making it impossible for PRS who have already been in Lebanon for over a year to renew their status.
- The cost of renewing residency permits for Syrian refugees is \$200 per person per year for everyone aged 15 and above; this is a prohibitive cost for nearly all refugees.