



palestine refugees in lebanon: struggling to survive

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About UNRWA

UNRWA is a United Nations agency established by the General Assembly in 1949 with a mandate to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to registered Palestine refugees in the Agency's area of operations, namely the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, pending a just and lasting solution to their plight. Thousands of Palestine refugees who lost both their homes and livelihood because of the 1948 conflict have remained displaced and in need of significant support for over seventy years. UNRWA helps them achieve their full potential in human development through quality services it provides in education, health care, relief and social services, protection, camp infrastructure and improvement, microfinance and emergency assistance. UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions.

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lebanon: “a deliberate depression”

Lebanon is currently facing an unprecedented economic and financial crisis characterized by the World Bank as a “deliberate depression”¹ and considered 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 people in Lebanon are living in poverty. In January 2021, the World Bank estimated that the Lebanese population overall poverty rate reached 45 per cent, which corresponds to approximately 1.7 million people (350,000 households) falling under the poverty line.² In its 2021 October economic update, the World Bank warned that the share of the Lebanese population under the US\$ 5.50 international poverty line is estimated to have risen by 13 percentage points by end- 2020 and is expected to further increase by as much as 28 percentage points by end 2021.³

As the currency depreciates amid the ongoing political uncertainty and in the absence of a financial rescue package, the purchasing power of households that earn their incomes in LBP continues to weaken and several imported and essential goods became unaffordable for families in Lebanon because of the currency crisis and ensuing hyperinflation.

The pandemic and losses resulting from the Beirut Port explosion led to further socio-economic deterioration and loss of livelihoods. The situation worsened in summer 2021 with the disruptions in the delivery of basic services such as electricity and water. This crisis is in fact putting the health, safety and education of the whole population at risk. The most vulnerable communities, including refugees, risk further marginalization and deprivation without a comprehensive social protection scheme to compensate for the losses. The hardship is particularly acute in communities that were already underprivileged, such as Palestine refugees, where unemployment and poverty have significantly increased.



the consumer price index (cpi) increased by **174 per cent** year-on-year in october 2021 as the **lebanese pound lost** more than **90 per cent** of its value compared to the us dollar



the cost of transportation surged by **508 per cent**, the prices of food and non-alcoholic beverages rose by **304 per cent** in october 2021 compared with last year prices



the world bank estimated that at least **45 per cent** of the population were living under the poverty line and expects the number to increase by as much as **28 percentage points** by the end of 2021



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coping with a multi-faceted crisis

UNRWA provides Palestine refugees residing in the twelve camps and elsewhere in Lebanon with health, education and social services, among other services. The Agency also provides 61,000 out of an estimated 180,000 Palestine refugees in Lebanon (PRL) with limited quarterly cash assistance, and more than 29,000 Palestine refugees from Syria (PRS) with monthly cash assistance. The needs of Palestine refugees increased significantly over the past two years, adding more burdens to a community that was marginalized even before the multi-faceted crisis.

In addition to the harsh economic conditions that Palestine refugees were facing before the economic crisis, COVID-19 and the measures imposed to contain its spread interrupted their work and source of livelihoods, restricted their movement and resulted in a deterioration of their well-being. Prolonged and repeated lockdowns had a significantly negative impact on vulnerable communities and individuals employed in the informal sector and depending on a daily income. This is the case of Palestine refugees in Lebanon who are denied the right to work in many professional categories.

“Most days, I cannot cook because we don’t have any food items. Our neighbours give us food, or charitable persons give us money or food items. Our life is not a life. We are dead and **this life is our grave.**”

Sundus Musylmani is forty-eight years old. She is a Palestine refugee from Lebanon who lives with her family in Beddawi camp in north Lebanon. She is a mother of four, the eldest is twenty and the youngest is six. Two of them are continuing their studies at UNRWA schools in the camp. Her husband Nuha, fifty-seven years old, was working as street coffee vendor, but he was forced to stop because of a severe problem with his lungs.



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“Today, we had potatoes for lunch. My husband works as a driver and earns less than US\$ 2 a day. We mainly eat vegetables and beans because that's all we can afford. Meat and chicken have become a dream, we can't buy them because prices have increased so sharply. We no longer eat three meals a day, **sometimes I send my kids to bed without dinner**”

Rihab Maajel 50, a Palestine refugee from the Shabriha gathering in southern Lebanon.

The World Food Programme conducted a rapid assessment⁴ between April and May 2020 to estimate the impact of the economic crisis and COVID-19 on the livelihoods and food security of people in Lebanon including Palestine and Syrian refugees. The findings of the assessment showed clearly how Palestine refugees were struggling to cover their basic needs and suffering from the repercussions of the economic crisis as well as the COVID-19 pandemic and its ensuing restrictions.

- 62 per cent of the interviewed Palestine refugees indicated that their household income was reduced following COVID-19 and the wave of public unrest compared with the previous year (2019) and 11 per cent resorted to alternative sources of income to compensate for their income losses.

During the period of the survey, 39 per cent of Palestine refugees reported that they lost their jobs and 21 per cent witnessed a reduction in their salary.

- A high proportion of the Palestine refugees who were interviewed indicated that they reduced their food consumption in the last 30 days (before and during the period of the survey April/May 2020) with 53 per cent indicating that they ate less expensive food, 15 per cent skipped meals and 8 per cent went for a whole day and night without eating.



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the ongoing deterioration of the socio-economic situation in lebanon since august 2020

The Beirut Port explosion, the ongoing economic crisis throughout 2020 and 2021 and the lifting of subsidies on essential products at the end of summer 2021 resulted in skyrocketing prices and shortages of food, fuel and medicine, coupled with electricity cuts, threatening the lives and safety of the entire population. Similarly to the rest of the Lebanese population, Palestinian refugees are at risk of food insecurity, electricity blackouts, increased health problems and complications amid the shortages of medicine and health-care interventions.

Rising poverty and food insecurity: A more recent high frequency survey conducted by UNRWA⁵ in July 2021 as part of the Agency's crisis monitoring efforts found that 58 per cent of the surveyed Palestinian families have consumed fewer meals per day in the seven days preceding the survey while 56 per cent of families have reduced the quantity of food they eat in their meals and 25 per cent of the adults in the families ate less in favor of their children. The survey also found that the poverty rate among Palestine refugees had reached 73 per cent.

“We are living in very bad and difficult conditions in Lebanon. I wait for UNRWA assistance every three months to buy food and medicine for my children.”

Nadia, a Palestine refugee from Lebanon living in Beddawi Camp, in northern Lebanon



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The shortage of fuel and diesel has intensified power cuts across the country, with some areas provided with only two hours of state power per day. People must, therefore, turn to private generators to have access to electricity. However, the currency depreciation resulted in a 2,050 per cent surge in the price of a tank of 20 liters of diesel in a year⁶, affecting households' ability to afford monthly subscription with private generators. The lack of electricity supply is expected to disrupt the lives of Palestine refugees as well as their access to heating during the winter. The price of 20 liters of 95-octane

and 98-octane gasoline stood at LBP 311,400 and LBP 321,400⁷ respectively in mid-November, representing almost one half of the legal minimum wage (which remains unchanged at LBP 675,000) and making transportation increasingly unaffordable. In addition, the price of a tank of cooking gas rose by 1,454 per cent⁸ compared with November 2020, adding more pressure and risks to food security with households unable to afford cooking at their houses.

“I fear that I may freeze to death this winter. I cannot afford to buy gas for heating. The cash assistance I receive from UNRWA is barely enough to buy food and cover very basic needs. I used to make some money as a tailor, but now I have glaucoma and I can no longer work.”

Nawal Kayed, 66, is a Palestine refugee in Wavel Camp, Beqaa, Lebanon.



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child and youth deprivation

In November 2021, UNICEF published a report⁹ describing the lives of children in Lebanon who are “surviving without basics” and warned against the uncertain future of an entire generation of children “who are going to bed hungry, not receiving adequate health care and skipping school.”

The report was based on the findings of two child-focused rapid assessments completed in April 2021 and October 2021 with the same families to monitor the impact of the crisis on children’s well-being.

The findings point to a drastic deterioration of the children’s quality of life on several fronts:

- 53.4 per cent of the surveyed families reported that they had at least one child who skipped a meal in October 2021, rising from 37 per cent in April.
- 3 out of 10 surveyed households cut the expense on their children’s education to cope with income losses. There was also a significant rise in the proportion of families sending their children to work with 12 per cent of households reporting that they sent their children to work compared with 9 per cent in April. In addition, 34 per cent of children included in this survey did not receive primary health care in October compared with 28 per cent in April.
- The findings also showed that 9 out of 10 surveyed families are facing electricity cuts.

As is the case for Lebanese children, the compounded crisis is taking a heavy toll on Palestine refugee children living in camps.

“Ali **had to take his eldest daughter out of school** when she was in grade 4 **to look after her two brothers** because their mother works as a cleaner. But even her daily work stopped due to the coronavirus outbreak.”

Ali Ayyoub, is a 42-year-old Palestine refugee from Beddawi Camp, north Lebanon.

Many of them are facing deprivation at different levels, as well as learning losses, mental distress and some of them are being forced to drop completely from school to support their families.

Food Price Inflation in Numbers

Food prices increased by 304 per cent in October 2021 compared with October 2020.¹⁰

The price of the World Food Program's food basket – which includes basic food items such as oil and lentils – increased five-fold since October 2019.¹¹

The price of a box of infant formula increased to LBP 100,000 from LBP 12,000 before the crisis, while the price of baby diapers now ranges between LBP 150,000 to LBP 250,000.¹²

Cost of Living Calculator – November 2021¹³

Assuming that a person earns the legal minimum wage of LBP 675,000 and works 40 hours per week on average:

Palestine refugee families are struggling to provide food and basic items to their children amid skyrocketing prices, shortages and income losses

2 hours and 15 mins of work



needed to buy a package of bread from a bakery at LBP 9,500

32 hours of work



needed to buy 1kg of ground beef at LBP 134,999

72 hours and 12 mins of work



needed to buy 20 liters of gas at LBP 313,000



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"I am separated. I clean houses and collect scrap metal to sell. I barely make LBP 700,000 a month, which is not enough for my most basic needs. I am very embarrassed when I go to buy vegetables for lunch, **because I won't be able to pay for them. I have no money.** I ask the seller to wait until the end of the month. Our main dish today will be boiled potatoes and I guess my daughter will have to eat the same thing tomorrow, too. I cannot afford anything else. My daughter asks me for a lot of stuff, but I cannot afford to get any of it. **I often take her with me to our neighbours'** houses in the afternoon to eat with their children. I do not have a grain of rice in the house."

Abeer Al-Sheikh, a 49-year-old Palestine refugee from Rashidieh Camp, Tyre, Lebanon.

The absence of a balanced and rich diet could translate in poor health outcomes among Palestine refugee children



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At the educational level, UNRWA estimates that more than 1,275 Palestine refugee students left school during the school year 2020-2021 in Lebanon, of whom 55 per cent left school as a result of psychological distress.

The students who had access to distance learning during the pandemic experienced learning losses due to the closure of schools and the under-developed communications infrastructure in Lebanon and inside the camps, which is not conducive to online learning. The lack of a stable internet connection, access to smart devices and academic support at home (from parents and relatives) have pushed some students to disengage from school.

Even after the end of the lockdowns and the re-opening of schools, students are still facing many challenges in attending their classes and enjoying an adequate learning experience.

The rise of transportation costs is disrupting the students' commute to school and the electricity cuts affect their studying hours.

There are also reports¹⁴ highlighting rising distress and violence against adolescents and young within the household, community or at school. Stress and violence have been increasing, especially that the pandemic-related tensions have been exacerbated by the economic and financial hardships that households are currently facing.

UNRWA indicates that the cases of child labour, including begging, rubbish collection and working regularly on the street, have risen during the pandemic, in addition to increased cases of child marriage, child abuse and harassment and violence against girls and women.¹⁵



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a crippling health-care crisis

The economic situation in Lebanon is having a negative impact on the access to medication and health services on top of the pandemic that is putting the health of vulnerable communities at risk.

ESCWA estimates that the share of household deprived from health care rose to 33 per cent in 2021 from 9 per cent in 2019, which corresponds to around 400,000 households out of a total of 1,210,000.¹⁶ The situation will deteriorate further if the government completely ends subsidies on health care and medicine. Given that some 55 per cent of the population are not covered by any form of health insurance, an end to government subsidies will be detrimental. In mid-November, the government lifted additional subsidies on medicine drugs used for cholesterol, blood pressure and other diseases¹⁷ and there are concerns about devastating consequences if subsidies on drugs needed for chronic diseases are completely removed.

With the ongoing social and economic crisis, Palestine refugees are facing difficulties in covering their most basic health care needs, which were already inaccessible even before

the crisis. There are alarming reports on Palestine refugees who are forgoing essential treatments for chronic diseases due to their inaccessibility and lack of health insurance coverage. The Agency's hospitalization policy covers only a percentage of hospital expenses and an increasing number of Palestine refugees are now unable to cover the remaining cost of care.

The reported numbers of COVID-19 related deaths show that the mortality rate for Palestine refugees is three times higher than the rates for Lebanese citizens¹⁸ as a result of the living conditions and cramped camps where social distancing is almost impossible. As of 31 December 2021, 489 Palestine refugees have died as a result of COVID-19.

Data from UNRWA indicates that more than 118,684 Palestine refugees received at least one dose of vaccine as of 31 December 2021.

"I suffered a serious stroke. It is difficult to afford to follow up with a specialist and afford for the medicine I need due to our extreme financial situation."

Ferial, a Palestine refugee from Lebanon who lives with her family in Ein El Hilweh camp.

unrwa: facing rising needs amid chronic budget shortfalls

UNRWA provides education, health, camp improvement, social services, including cash assistance, and protection amid rising needs of the Palestine refugee population in Lebanon in the context of the socio-economic and COVID-19 crises and with critical funding shortages.

- **Education Programme**

From 2019 UNRWA has applied its Education in Emergencies approach to minimize teaching and learning disruptions for over 39,000 Palestine refugee students currently attending the Agency's 65 schools spread across Lebanon. UNRWA has ensured the continuity of learning, the provision of psychosocial support, and the safety, security as well as the health and hygiene of students and staff during periods of lockdowns and re-openings. UNRWA is currently applying in-class learning and home-based learning on alternating weeks to minimize class sizes and the risk of COVID-19 transmission. The Agency is also working with partners to provide transport subsidies to the students most in need to avoid drop outs due to economic hardship.

- **Health Services and COVID-19 Response**

UNRWA provides primary health-care services through 27 health centres spread across the country, in addition to subsidizing the costs of secondary and tertiary health care, covering normally 90 and 60 per cent of bills at a broad network of contracted hospitals. The Agency seeks to support hardship cases through an additional fund for chronic and catastrophic illnesses.

In order to respond to the spread of COVID-19 in the camps, UNRWA established three isolation centers providing 170-bed capacity, as well as ensuring 100 percent coverage of hospitalization expenses. The Agency also provides testing and vaccination services. As of 3 December 2021, UNRWA had administered a total of 1,490 COVID-19 vaccines through the Agency's health centres and mobile clinics.

- **Relief and Social Services**

UNRWA supports 61,709 Palestine refugees in Lebanon through a social safety net programme with yearly payments of US\$ 130 per individual. As of January 2022 the Agency will also support more than 29,000 refugees from Syria (PRS) with monthly payments of US\$ 25 per person. In 2021, UNRWA also provided one-off cash assistance in the amount of US\$ 40 to highly vulnerable beneficiaries including families with children, the disabled and the elderly. This level of support is below the actual needs and expectations of the refugees.

- **Field Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Programme**

The twelve camps in Lebanon suffer from overcrowding, severely dilapidated shelters and poor environmental health conditions. UNRWA undertakes shelter rehabilitation for the poorest and most vulnerable families; the total number of petitions made by camp residents currently stands in excess of 6,000. Population growth, compounded by the influx of Palestinian refugees from Syria, has placed heavy pressure on water-supply sources and networks, sewerage and drainage systems, as well as operations related to the camps' solid waste management. In response to acute needs for potable water within the camps, UNRWA is upgrading the infrastructure systems in the camps and connecting shelters to water supply networks. The Agency also removes approximately 59,000 tonnes of solid waste from the camps annually.

- **Protection**

UNRWA interventions for the most vulnerable include the identification and referral of protection cases, the provision of specialized services for victims of gender-based violence and child protection, as well as the provision of mental health and psychosocial support. The Agency also offers legal aid services and engages with duty bearers to advocate for Palestine refugee rights. Special attention is given to the work to eliminate violence against children and gender-based violence in all UNRWA installations, and to strengthen neutrality.

UNRWA remains the lifeline of Palestine refugees in Lebanon. However, the Agency is facing an ongoing financial crisis resulting from a chronic budget shortfall and austerity measures enforced for several years. As a result, the Agency's ability to maintain and expand its protection and assistance role, and deliver quality services, is constantly at risk.

"Refugees I met are utterly desperate and struggle to cover their basic needs I am raising the alarm and calling on the international community to ensure adequate support for UNRWA so that those refugees continue receiving much needed assistance and have a dignified life."

- UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini

footnotes

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اللاجئين الفلسطينيين في الشرق الأدنى