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**Needs of refugees**

On January 18, Lebanon’s human rights record was examined by the United Nations Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review Working Group.

Prior to the session, the government of Lebanon submitted a report to the UNHRC on the progress it had made in addressing the shortcomings and failures the working group identified in its previous assessment in 2015. In the 27-page report covering a variety of human rights-related issues, there was also a section dedicated to the rights of the more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees Lebanon is currently hosting. Beyond providing information on the legal and administrative framework it uses to regulate the presence of Syrian nationals in Lebanon, however, the Lebanese government said very little in this report about the hardships Syrian refugees are currently facing in the country.

In three short and dry paragraphs, the government explained that it is working with international partners to meet the “growing humanitarian needs” of these refugees and expressed concern over the “risk of a decline” in international funding for programmes aiming to uphold their living conditions. However, it did not even mention the vicious discrimination, dehumanisation and violence Syrian refugees in Lebanon are regularly being subjected to with impunity.

On December 27, 2020, for example, a group of Lebanese men set fire to an informal refugee settlement near the town of Bhanine in the northern Miniyeh region. The flames tore through tented shelters housing some 370 Syrian refugees, including dozens of children, leaving them with no shelter or possessions in the middle of winter. A number of refugees also suffered burn injuries as a result of the attack.

The violent attack on the Bhannine camp, sadly, did not come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the plight of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. While it made headlines across the world because of the scale of the destruction it caused, it was just the latest in a string of similar incidents. Indeed, due to the systematic dehumanisation of Syrian refugees in the Lebanese media and political discourse, these days even the smallest disputes between Syrians and the locals often result in violence.

Lebanese politicians and media have long blamed Syrian refugees for Lebanon’s myriad social, political and economic problems. But as the COVID-19 pandemic and the disastrous Beirut port explosion increased the pressures on the state, the vilification of Syrian refugees gained additional force, with disastrous consequences. They have been falsely blamed for the government’s inability to stop the spread of the virus and bring the growing economic crisis under control, and became targets of public anger.

Local authorities across Lebanon also used the pandemic to double down on their efforts to isolate Syrian refugees from the wider community. At least 21 Lebanese municipalities introduced restrictions on Syrian refugees that do not apply to Lebanese citizens. In some areas, bans on movement and gathering were imposed on Syrians before they were extended to Lebanese. As informal refugee settlements were put under curfews, more security personnel were deployed to these areas to police the daily lives of refugees.

These discriminatory practices not only created the false impression that refugees are more likely to spread the virus, increasing the anti-refugee sentiment in the country, but also limited the refugees’ ability to access most basic health services in the middle of a public health emergency. In the early days of the pandemic, civil society organisations providing healthcare services to Syrian refugees reported a sharp decline in the number of people visiting their clinics due to strict curfews and movement restrictions.

Accessing healthcare became such an impossibility for Syrian refugees during the pandemic that, in November, a Syrian father who had been unable to secure medical treatment for his sick daughter tried to set himself on fire in front of the UNHCR offices in Beirut. This was tragically only the latest in a long list of self-immolation by Syrian refugees in the country.

While Covid-19 and the discriminatory measures introduced to combat it undoubtedly made life more difficult for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, their situation was already dire long before the beginning of the pandemic.

In Lebanon, most Syrian refugees do not have legal residency and less than 1 percent have a work permit. This means most Syrians in Lebanon are destitute and live with the constant fear of detention and deportation.

The fear of deportation is most severe for those who defected from the Syrian military and fled to Lebanon. Lebanese security forces are increasingly detaining Syrian defectors and handing them over to the al-Assad regime, despite such actions being illegal under international law.

Excerpted: ‘Plight of Syrian refugees in Lebanon must not be ignored’

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