

Medical Aid for Palestinians submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights ahead of visit to Lebanon

08 October 2021

1. Introduction

Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP) is a humanitarian and development organisation, operating in the Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territory since the 1980s. Our key areas of work are women and children's health; disability; mental health and psychosocial support; and emergency response and emerging needs.

MAP has a permanent team in Lebanon, based in Beirut, and works with local partners in the 12 Palestinian refugee camps and other informal gatherings across the country. Through our work, MAP has witnessed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing economic crisis on Palestinian refugees, who have long been among Lebanon's most impoverished, marginalised and thus vulnerable communities.

In this submission, we provide a brief contextual overview of the key challenges to the rights and wellbeing of Palestinian communities in Lebanon, including chronically high rates of poverty, unemployment and food insecurity which pre-date the current economic crisis. We also describe the key contextual drivers of this situation, including discriminatory laws which obstruct Palestinian refugees' right to work.

Our team in Lebanon are ready to provide any further information from MAP or our programmatic partners, and would gladly help facilitate to the Palestinian refugee camps of Burj al Barajneh or Shatila in Beirut, as may be helpful to the preparation of the Special Rapporteur's report.

2. Context

Between 1947 and 1949, during what Palestinians call the Nakba ("Catastrophe"), approximately 100,000 Palestinians fled from their homelands in Mandate Palestine to Lebanon. They were later joined by refugees following the 1967 war, and 1970 fighting in Jordan.¹ Today, there are over 480,000 Palestinian refugees registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) in Lebanon, with approximately 270,000 estimated to reside in the country.² Almost half (45%) of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon live in the country's 12 official refugee camps.³ UNICEF estimates that more than half of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are children.⁴

¹ MAP (2018), Health in Exile: Barriers to the Health and Dignity of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon, <https://www.map.org.uk/downloads/health-in-exile--barriers-to-the-health-and-dignity-of-palestinian-refugees-in-lebanon.pdf>

² UNRWA (2019), Protection in Lebanon, <https://www.unrwa.org/activity/protection-lebanon>

³ UNRWA, Where We Work, <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon#:~:text=More%20than%20479%2C000%20refugees%20are,the%20country's%2012%20refugee%20camps.&text=Most%20are%20receiving%20UNRWA%20assistance,%2C%20health%20care%2C%20and%20protection.>

⁴ UNICEF (2021), "All my daughter is asking for is to officially be a refugee!" <https://www.unicef.org/mena/stories/just-want-be-refugee>

For more than 70 years these refugees have been denied their inalienable rights to return to their homeland and to compensation for loss or damage to their property by discriminatory laws in Israel.⁵ Despite more than seven decades in Lebanon, Palestinian refugees remain classified as “foreigners” by the government, and denied many of the rights afforded to Lebanese nationals, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis caused by prolonged exile.⁶ They are prohibited by Lebanese law and practice from working in 39 professions, including engineering, transport, law, fishing and healthcare, and excluded from key aspects of social security including health and maternity benefits.⁷ This leaves Palestinians particularly reliant on low-paying, insecure and low-skill jobs and thus vulnerable to economic hardship during times of crises, and impacts their health and ability to access essential services and goods.

3. Palestinian refugees amid Lebanon’s economic crisis

Between June 2019 and June 2021 the income poverty rate for among Lebanese families almost tripled (from 25% to 74% of the population).⁸ Since 2019, the local currency has lost more than 90% of its value and inflation has exceeded 100%.⁹ The price of essential food items in Lebanon has increased by more than 700%,¹⁰ leaving 77% of households without enough food or money to buy it.¹¹ In July, UNICEF warned that 71% of the population of Lebanon were at immediate risk of losing access to safe drinking water.¹²

Although there have not been comprehensive reviews of the impact of the economic crisis on Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, their pre-existing chronic impoverishment and marginalisation have left them exceptionally vulnerable. Before the crisis, the poverty rate among Palestinian refugees stood at 65%, more than double the poverty rate among Lebanese.¹³

A World Food Program study in 2020 found that 44% of Palestinians in Lebanon reported an inability to stockpile food during the COVID-19 pandemic due to affordability and two thirds worried about not having enough food to eat.¹⁴ The same study reported that one in five Palestinian refugees had

⁵ Adalah Legal Center, Citizenship Law <https://www.adalah.org/en/law/view/537> and Law of Return, <https://www.adalah.org/en/law/view/536>

⁶ MAP (2018), Health in Exile, <https://www.map.org.uk/downloads/health-in-exile--barriers-to-the-health-and-dignity-of-palestinian-refugees-in-lebanon.pdf>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (2021), Multidimensional poverty in Lebanon (2019-2021), https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/news/docs/21-00634-multidimensional_poverty_in_lebanon_policy_brief_-_en.pdf

⁹ MAP (2021), One year after the Beirut explosion, Lebanon faces a deepening humanitarian crisis, <https://www.map.org.uk/news/archive/post/1276-one-year-after-the-beirut-explosion-lebanon-faces-a-deepening-humanitarian-crisis>

¹⁰ Najia Houssari (2021), Lebanon could turn into ‘Venezuela of the Mediterranean,’ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1898076/amp>

¹¹ UNICEF (2021), Lebanon: Children’s Future on the Line, <https://www.unicef.org/lebanon/media/6541/file>

¹² UNICEF (2021), Lebanon in danger of losing critical access to water, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/lebanon-danger-losing-critical-access-water>

¹³ UNRWA (2015), Survey on the Socioeconomic Status of Palestinian Refugees, https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/survey_on_the_economic_status_of_palestine_refugees_in_lebanon_2015.pdf

¹⁴ World Food Program (2020), Assessing the Impact of the Economic and COVID-19 crisis in Lebanon, <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000116784/download/>

exhausted their capacity to cope with income gaps – i.e. spending savings, borrowing from friends or family, or borrowing on credit.¹⁵

For many refugees, restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic and protests and roadblocks related to the economic crisis saw a spike in unemployment – and a loss of vital income needed to cover the increasing costs. In May 2021 Inas*, a resident of Ein el Helweh camp, told MAP:

“We are no longer able to afford four meals per day, so we started having only two instead. My husband and I always prioritise our children; if we have two loaves of bread, we give both to the children to eat, and if there are any leftovers, my husband and I will have those. I do not mind being hungry, but I do not want my children to suffer or for their health to be affected. I do not cook on daily basis anymore. I cook once every three days as food items have become very expensive and cooking oil is not affordable.”¹⁶

4. Access to healthcare

The semi-permanent system of healthcare which has developed to address the needs of Palestinian refugees, comprising UN agencies, local and international NGOs, the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, and private self-funded care from Lebanese providers, is piecemeal and chronically under-resourced. As a result Palestinian refugees struggle to access adequate services to meet their needs. Around 95% do not have health insurance, and therefore rely on the UNRWA and other agencies to provide primary care and to cover hospital fees.¹⁷

UNRWA relies almost entirely on voluntary contributions by States and remains chronically underfunded. UNRWA’s funding shortfall, and the decision by the US government in 2018 to cut all funding to the agency, have seriously hampered its ability to deliver services, and left Palestinian refugees even more precarious.¹⁸ The announced restoration of US funding in April is a welcome step, however the \$150 million falls well below previous levels and the levels required for UNRWA to fulfil its mandate.¹⁹ In October, the Agency announced it is \$100 million short of covering its 2021 activities – some of which may shut down in November and December – and issued a call for \$800 million to cover health and social welfare for Palestinian refugees in 2021.²⁰

Amid the economic crisis, Lebanese hospitals have been operating at 50% capacity due to fuel shortages, and almost 40% of skilled medical doctors and 30% of registered nurses have left the

¹⁵ World Food Program (2020), Assessing the Impact of the Economic and COVID-19 crisis in Lebanon, <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000116784/download/>

¹⁶ MAP (2021), Our essential food support to vulnerable Palestinian refugees in Lebanon this Ramadan, <https://www.map.org.uk/news/archive/post/1222-our-essential-food-support-to-vulnerable-palestinian-refugees-in-lebanon-this-ramadan>

¹⁷ World Food Program (2020), Assessing the Impact of the Economic and COVID-19 crisis in Lebanon, <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000116784/download/>

¹⁸ MAP (2018), Joint statement: The UK must show leadership on UNRWA and the rights of Palestinian refugees, <https://www.map.org.uk/news/archive/post/907-joint-statement-the-uk-must-show-leadership-on-unrwa-and-the-rights-of-palestinian-refugees>

¹⁹ MAP (2021), MAP joins UK charities urging the government to uphold the rights and dignity of Palestinians, <https://www.map.org.uk/news/archive/post/1228-map-joins-uk-charities-urging-government-to-uphold-the-rights-and-dignity-of-palestinians-as-they-face-ongoing-dispossession>

²⁰ Al Jazeera (2021), UN agency says it needs \$800m a year to assist Palestinians, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/1/unrwa-needs-800m-a-year-to-assist-palestinians>

country.²¹ Since the lifting of government subsidies in July, the cost of essential medications has dramatically increased and are scarcely found in pharmacies across the country.²² In 2020, 71% who needed to buy medicine reported challenges in doing so – the economic situation has only worsened since then.²³ Inas* explained that:

“When we go to a hospital for any problem, they won’t receive us without a negative PCR [COVID-19] test, which costs 75,000 to 180,000 Lebanese Pounds [£35 to £85 GBP]. We don’t have this money, so we decide not to go the hospital even for essential matters.”

5. Vulnerable groups among Palestinian refugees

The following groups have faced the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis – and continue to be marginalised in the emergency response:

People with disabilities

In Lebanon, one in ten Palestinian families have at least one member with a disability. Before the crisis, extremely poor Palestinian refugee households were twice as likely to have a family member with a functional disability, compared with the average Palestinian refugee households.²⁴ Through MAP’s program to provide essential winter supplies in the Bekaa Valley, we heard from several families with a disabled family member. Ahlam*, the oldest of four sisters living in the Bekaa Valley, explained that her sister who has a disability and works for a local charity is “paid pennies:”

“When we have money to buy food, we eat. Other days, we don’t. We don’t even mention it because we don’t want to put pressure on our sister Rola. In winter, we try to cover up using whatever blankets we have, and only when the cold becomes intolerable at night then we turn on the heater. Fuel is expensive, and we cannot afford it.”²⁵

Pregnant women, nursing mothers and infants

With food prices skyrocketing, many Palestinian refugees are unable to afford basic food supplies leading to poor nutrition with harmful effects on mothers and babies, in particular. For many mothers with anaemia, for example, essential and nutritious foods like meat became unaffordable.²⁶ Malnutrition is an underlying cause of almost half of deaths for under-five-year-olds globally.²⁷ One

²¹ United Nations (2021), Lebanon crisis: More international assistance needed urgently - WHO chief <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1100172>

²² Ghada Alsharif, Wael Taleb, Rana Tabbara (2021), Health Ministry announces partial end to drug subsidies, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/amp/1268735/caretaker-health-minister-hamad-hassan-has-announced-that-subsidies-will-be-lifted-from-medications-currently-priced-at-less-than-8-on-the-official-ex>

²³ World Food Program (2020), Assessing the Impact of the Economic and COVID-19 crisis in Lebanon, <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000116784/download/>

²⁴ UNRWA (2017), Protection Brief: Palestine Refugees living in Lebanon, https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/lebanon_protection_brief_october_2017.pdf

²⁵ MAP (2021), As harsh weather hits, MAP distributes essential winter supplies in Lebanon, <https://www.map.org.uk/news/archive/post/1186-as-harsh-weather-hits-map-distributes-essential-winter-supplies-in-lebanon>

²⁶ MAP (2021), Supporting Palestinian mothers amid Lebanon’s economic crisis, <https://www.map.org.uk/news/archive/post/1273-supporting-palestinian-mothers-amid-lebanonas-economic-crisis>

²⁷ Ibid.

mother, who is supported by MAP's community midwife program, explained that amidst the ongoing crises:

*"Mothers who give their babies artificial milk are now struggling because it is no longer available in pharmacies and, when found, it is extremely expensive."*²⁸

The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded these risks. According to the Head of the National Order of Midwives, it was a common issue that pregnant women in Lebanon were foregoing medical consultations out of fear of testing positive for COVID-19:

*"Sometimes they were experiencing serious complications and health problems – such as gestational diabetes, hypertension or anaemia – but were not aware of it as they were not attending pregnancy routine consultations or doing essential tests. Thus, reaching out to these pregnant women during the pandemic and providing them with evidence-based information and pregnancy care through community-based midwifery has never been more important."*²⁹

Palestinian refugee youth

The desperate economic situation in Lebanon has exposed young Palestinian refugees to many risks, including leaving education early, and joining criminal gangs or armed groups. In part, this is down to their inability to find work to support their studies, and has affected not only their ability to study but their mental health, too.

Dunia, a psychotherapist working with the National Institution of Social Care and Vocational Training, a MAP partner, explained the impact of economic uncertainty:

*"Palestinian youth ... already had many uncertainties, for example related to whether they will be able to continue their education, whether they will be able to work after they graduate, or even if their families will be able to afford food the next day. The COVID-19 crisis intensified these fears and concerns; young Palestinians started thinking about their future prospects and the inequalities and injustices that deprived them from opportunities that other youth have in Lebanon. Some of them became more frustrated or experienced increased feelings of hopelessness that their conditions may worsen."*³⁰

The added complications of remote study, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, has further challenged young Palestinians' education in Lebanon – with electricity shortages impacting their ability to connect to online learning. Shadi*, a Palestinian refugee displaced from Syria, told us:

"Online learning has caused us too much stress. How are we expected to study online when we do not have electricity or internet! It is not possible to grasp everything, and it is not possible to

²⁸ MAP (2021), Supporting Palestinian mothers amid Lebanon's economic crisis, <https://www.map.org.uk/news/archive/post/1273-supporting-palestinian-mothers-amid-lebanonas-economic-crisis>

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ MAP (2020), Tip of the iceberg: deeper implications of COVID-19 for Palestinian communities, <https://www.map.org.uk/news/archive/post/1169-tip-of-the-iceberg-the-deeper-implications-of-covid-19-for-palestinian-communities>

build relationships with our classmates and teachers to facilitate asking for help when needed. We have been struggling throughout the year and now they want us to sit for official exams!”³¹

6. Recommendations

In our 2018 report *Health in Exile: Barriers to the Health and Dignity of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon*,³² MAP made the following recommendations to the international community:

1. Increase support for healthcare providers including UNRWA, local and international NGOs to fill immediate gaps in healthcare provision for Palestinian refugee communities;
2. Work with service providers – UNRWA, the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS), NGOs and others – to ensure that healthcare provision for Palestinian refugees is affordable, appropriate, sustainable and comprehensive;
3. Ensure that aid and development initiatives aimed at addressing the humanitarian needs of Palestinian refugees consult with these communities and uphold their right to self-determination;
4. Work with the Lebanon authorities to remove all discriminatory laws and practices against Palestinian refugees, including the right to work;
5. Support professional development and employment initiatives for Palestinian refugee health workers in Lebanon; and
6. Develop and/or expand international scholarship opportunities for Palestinian refugee health professionals to undertake training and education overseas.

7. Additional resources

- [MAP \(2018\), Health in Exile: Barriers to the Health and Dignity of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon](#)
- [UNRWA Department of Health \(2020\), Annual Report](#)
- [MAP \(2021\), “Our essential food support to vulnerable Palestinian refugees in Lebanon this Ramadan”](#)
- [MAP \(2021\), “As harsh weather hits, MAP distributes essential winter supplies in Lebanon”](#)
- [MAP \(2021\) “One year after the Beirut explosion, Lebanon faces a deepening humanitarian crisis”](#)

*all names have been changed to protect identities

³¹ MAP (2021), How overlapping crises are affecting young Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, <https://www.map.org.uk/news/archive/post/1257-how-overlapping-crises-are-affecting-young-palestinian-refugees-in-lebanon>

³² MAP (2018), Health in Exile, <https://www.map.org.uk/downloads/health-in-exile--barriers-to-the-health-and-dignity-of-palestinian-refugees-in-lebanon.pdf>