



March 13th, 2016.

**His Excellency Ban Ki-Moon
United Nations - Secretary General.**

Re: Syrian Refugees in Lebanon “Voluntary Return” decision needs to be replaced by “Secured Return”.

Last December a General Conference of “Donor Countries” was held to provide assistance to refugees from the current conflict in Syria. It was convened by UNESCO and attended by the Foreign Ministers of “host countries”, in order to reach decisions that could organize the situation of refugees and the provision of assistance to them.

In the final statement of the conference, Lebanon objected to the inclusion of the expression "**the voluntary return**" of refugees, and insisted on using the expression of their "**Secured Return**" when the situation in their country is stable and safe.

Three months later, UN Secretary General, Mr. Ban Ki-Moon diverted from the mutual agreement with Lebanese Foreign Ministry and reverted to the use of "**Voluntary return**". In this regard, the World Lebanese Cultural Union would like to clarify the following:

Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention nor to the 1967 New York Protocol which regulates the status of refugees fleeing from armed conflicts to host or third world countries, and stipulates that their repatriation, including to third countries, must be "**voluntary and of their choice**" without any pressures. Lebanon is therefore not bound by the said convention, including the use of the terms "**voluntary**" and "**chosen**" return. In addition, article 12 of the International Pact on Civil and Political Rights gives precedence to national peace and security and public order over civil rights.

Despite the fact that states are bound by the general principles of international law and customary law with regard to refugees, we are currently witnessing attempts to impose a “voluntary” concept for the return of the refugees present on Lebanese soil, as soon as the wars in their countries have ceased, which is not in the predictable future.

While one may arguably admit that the general conduct of host countries since WW2 has permitted the voluntary return of refugees once the wars had ceased, Lebanon has its own specificities which we would like to draw attention to in the present statement and which make it impossible for Lebanon to adopt a similar approach:



- 1- Lebanon has proportionally been the largest migrant exporting country throughout history considering its small surface area and limited resources. This is evidenced by a long established Lebanese Diaspora all over the planet, which range between 13 -18 Millions according to Wikipedia.
- 2- The presence of over half a million Palestinian refugees on its soil for nearly 70 years with no prospect of settlement for them in the foreseeable future has had negative consequences and ruined any trust we had in the international community in regards to its often unworkable promises .
- 3- The unprecedented influx of Syrian refugees in such a short span (less than two years) is far above and beyond Lebanon's capacity to accommodate such numbers and the pressures it entails.
- 4- The deteriorating condition of infrastructures and services in Lebanon, due to widely known reasons that do not need to be detailed here.
- 5- The country is currently facing huge security risks with new terrorist networks being unmasked day after day among refugees. The latter are systematically infiltrated by extremist factions exploiting their religious beliefs and social and economic needs. This represents a direct threat to peace and security in the region and the world.
- 6- All the countries that have opened their doors to refugees have each accommodated less than 1% of their total population. In this case the proportional fair share of Lebanon should be no higher than **40 thousands** instead of the current minimum **3 millions** of Palestinian, Syrian, Iraqi and Kurdish refugees. That is 75% of its own population of 4 million people.
- 7- A resulting obvious demographic imbalance in favor of a particular community in a country that is an international beacon of harmonious coexistence between its religions. This represents an imminent threat to internal peace.
- 8- An unfair competition in favor of Syrian manpower over Lebanese workers.
- 9- Conflicts and negative interactions between Lebanese nationals and refugee groups are registered daily by the Lebanese authorities for obvious reasons. The rational decision is to reduce the number of refugees in Lebanon in order to avoid the worst.
- 10- Alleged historical claims of Syria over Lebanon as part of the Syrian State, and its unbridled desire to annex it. Within this context, the refugee flows could facilitate an old scheme that future Syrian governments may seek to exploit by refusing access to post conflict returnees and seeking their integration in the Lebanese society in order to help them achieve a long coveted desire.

We have no doubt that our country cannot perform a miracle and absorb these huge numbers of new citizens. We suggest an immediate distribution to third countries in accordance with the general



principles of the Refugee Law System. Until the end of the crisis in Syria, Lebanon could host a number that is proportional to its capacities, surface area and other service provision capacities.

The World Lebanese Cultural Union, representing the Lebanese Diaspora, stands fully behind this proposal. We respectfully ask His Excellency Secretary General Mr. Ban Ki Moon to take our proposals into consideration and to immediately start implementing our just request.

Our future generations will thus remember you as the Guardian of the rights of refugees and of international peace and security.

Note: Enclosed is detailed study about the impact of the Syrian Refugee crisis on Lebanon infrastructure.

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Appendix

The impact of the Syrian refugee crisis on Lebanon and its infrastructure

The Syrian war started March 15th 2011, more than 220,000 people got killed based on the UN estimate, 300,000 based on Concern Organization. This tragic war changed the demographics and the map of Syria as we know it, it fragmented the country and displaced millions of its people. Chaos and quagmire spread all over, massive destruction, senseless civilian deaths, hunger and diseases demolished any hope for the native Syrians. This horrible war forced many Syrians to flee to neighboring countries and Europe in order to save their children and their lives. Lebanon being a neighboring country hosted around 2,000,000 Syrian. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) put the number of Syrian refugees as of December 2015 at 1,835,840.

There are now 4.3 million Syrians scattered throughout the region, making them the world's largest refugee population under the United Nations' mandate.

“The impact of the Syrian crisis - including on the economy, demographics, political instability, and security - continues to deepen across Lebanon. Lebanon's exceptional hospitality will be extremely stretched.” Based on UNHCR. “An effective display of international solidarity and support is vital for Lebanon, which has received the highest number of Syrian refugees in the world. Failing this, the country's capacity to respond and withstand the Syria crisis will be severely tested.” UNHCR. Below is a list of major impacts on the Lebanese infrastructure.

A. Garbage problem

Lebanon has been suffering from Waste Management problem and inability to pick up the garbage and disposing it for over a year now. The intolerable smell, the pollution impacts on our environment, the epidemic diseases are threatening Lebanon and the whole geographic area around us. This is an unprecedented phenomenon that is causing panic and fear among Lebanon helpless population.

“Heaps of garbage that rot in the summer heat pock marking crowded residential areas—poisoning the air and polluting the soil, causing [respiratory diseases](#) and fueling fears of [cholera](#). A woman unable to ventilate her tiny, sweltering apartment, angrily lamenting that the waste now piling up to the veranda brings pests, smells and infections.” Washington Post August 2015.



B. Water shortage

The need for water is increasing at an exponential rate due to the explosive population growth and the massive Syrian Refugees influx into the country. Lebanon is unable to provide enough fresh water to meet basic needs of its population. The water shortage has catastrophic consequences on the area and the need to avert this threat is critical.

C. Power shortage

Power outages has crippled Lebanon for a while now, it has been further exacerbated by the huge demand that the massive Syrian Refugees put on an already ailing system. One of the water shortage impacts is an automatic shortage in electricity generating domino effects across everything that needs power.

“Outages have plagued Lebanon since its own 1975-1990 civil war and the power crisis is a legacy of that conflict, with the country now shackled by paralysis in government and widely perceived corruption that has put a brake on development.” Reuters/Aziz Taher

D. Menacing Hunger

Lebanon depends mainly on Tourism to withstand itself. Due to the crisis that it is currently facing, the number of tourists dwindled drastically leaving the Lebanese with no work opportunities for its youth. Consequently, most of the Lebanese left the country seeking other opportunities all over the globe. Currently, the number of Lebanese in the Diaspora is around 13-18 millions according to Wikipedia. Most of the Lebanese that are left in Lebanon rely mainly on financial help from their immediate relatives overseas. Those who have no relatives overseas are literally starving. If this is the case with local Lebanese, just imagine the situation of the refugees. It is pathetic and painful at best. Many children are suffering from malnutrition and diseases brought on by shortage in food and diseases due to poor sanitation, lack of immunization and essential medical help.

E. Unbearable Traffic Jam

Lebanon suffers from shortage of public transportation and dire financial situation that prevented it from modernizing its traffic system. Lebanon could not create new bridges; widen its freeways and fix its roads that are plagued with unbearable and dangerous potholes. These problems are making it nearly



impossible for people to get to work within a decent timeframe. Lebanon has been seeing an alarming increase in road rage and fatal accidents as a direct result to its suffocating traffic situation.

The statistics below are taken from the study titled “Analysis of Accident Patterns in Lebanon” by Dr. Elias M. Shoueiri.

- “Congestion on roads was estimated to cost Lebanon \$2000 million per year (approximately 15 per cent of the GDP).”
- “Traffic accidents in Lebanon were estimated to cost the national economy about 1.5 per cent of its GDP.”
- “There are about 3 million daily-motorized trips within the greater Beirut area (capital of Lebanon), of which about two-thirds are made by cars; this percentage of car usage is very high, even for developed countries, where it should not exceed 50%.”
- “Daily motorized trips within the greater Beirut area are expected to increase to about 5 millions by 2015. “

F. Inability to educate the children of the refugees

“Between 2 million and 3 million Syrian children are not attending school. The U.N. children’s agency says the war reversed 10 years of progress in education for Syrian children based on Save the Refugees Organization.”

“Places are allocated in both the regular shift, where Syrian refugees will have the chance to go to class alongside Lebanese children, and the second shift – specially designed to accommodate more Syrian children in schools.

A total of 1,278 public schools will manage the increased number of students, while another 259 schools– 115 more schools than last year – will provide the second shifts in the afternoon.

Close to 417,000 Syrian refugee children in Lebanon are aged between three and 14 years old, which is the age range targeted by the Back to School campaign. Despite the increase in places for Syrian refugees in schools this year, at least 200,000 Syrian refugee children will remain out of school, pending more opportunities in Lebanese public schools including vocational schools.” UNHCR October 2nd, 2015. Lebanon has exerted itself beyond its means to help the Syrian refugee children; nevertheless these efforts are impossible to sustain long term.

G. Taking jobs from Lebanese due to cheap labor/Housing problem/Overpopulation

“Lebanese communities have shown incredible generosity and resilience, many taking refugees into their homes and providing food. But the sheer number of people pouring into such a small country means the strain is just too much,” said Anita Delhaas-van Dijk, the National Director for World Vision in



Lebanon. "The cracks are starting to show with worsening security and rising tensions. Communities are facing unbearable pressure. As the Syria conflict deepens, these pressures are more acutely felt. The crisis threatens to destabilize the whole region."

"Under pressure: the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis on host communities in Lebanon," found many Lebanese families face financial ruin as wages plummet and rent prices soar, with hard-pressed Syrian refugees working for less money and sharing single-family homes with multiple families to save on rent. This strain is particularly difficult for Lebanese and Syrian children who are getting lost in the midst of the crisis." World Vision's study

Summary

"The Syrian refugees have joined a pre-existing Palestine refugee population, making Lebanon the country with the highest concentration of refugees per capita worldwide.

Refugee flow has had severe impacts on national security and the economy, leading to further destabilization in Lebanon. The refugee flow has placed a serious burden on public services delivery including education, healthcare, housing, sanitation, water, and electricity, as well as on physical infrastructure that has lacked adequate capacity. Labor competition and the feeling that Syrians receive different financial treatment have generated ambivalent attitudes and resentments among locals. Both government and public concerns regarding the Syrian crisis and refugees may increase sectarian volatility and deepen pre-existing tensions due to the long and tortured history of Syria-Lebanon relations. One extreme risk might be the militarization of refugees. A strong government and regional/international support are vital for Lebanon to ensure stability in such a destabilizing situation. " Project on the Middle East and the Arab Spring (POMEAS).

The real solution is to find a political resolution to the Syrian war and help return all the Syrian refugees to their homeland. The Lebanese need a homeland to return to.

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