

## Crisis in Lebanon: camps for Syrian refugees?

Jeremy Loveless

**Lebanon has absorbed the enormous Syrian influx but at a high cost to both refugees and Lebanese populations. Current humanitarian programmes can no longer cope and new approaches are needed.**

At the end of April 2013, according to UNHCR data, there were 445,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon, including both those who are registered and those waiting to be registered. There are also many thousands of refugees who have not tried to register. Government of Lebanon and UN projections estimate that there will be one million Syrian refugees in Lebanon by the end of 2013. Lebanon's population is approximately 4.2 million. Based on the official numbers alone, Syrian refugees make up 10% of the population already and by the end of the year this will rise to 20%.

The Government of Lebanon has, in many respects, pursued an admirable policy. Borders have remained open. Refugees have been allowed to settle where they like and they are allowed to work. Camps have been prohibited and refugees have settled within communities. The approach has been applauded by the international community.

However, it comes at a cost. Refugees are concentrated in some of the poorest parts of the country. Sudden expansion of the labour pool has pushed down wages for Lebanese and Syrians alike. Education and health services that were inadequate before are now further stretched. All available housing is full or over-full and refugees are setting up unsanitary shanty settlements. There is a perception that international assistance is going only to refugees. Tension between refugees and Lebanese communities is rising.

On arrival in Lebanon most refugees rent private dwellings (paid from their savings or, for the lucky few, by relatives or charities). Thousands live in unfinished buildings. These buildings accord minimum protection against the elements: a roof and walls but

frequently no windows, doors or sanitary facilities. In many of these areas temperatures fall well below freezing in the winter. Some aid agencies are running programmes to seal these dwellings by covering windows, fixing doors, etc. This takes time and is expensive, as each building must be identified and renovated individually.

There are very few opportunities for employment, so many refugees resort to desperate measures to cover their costs. These include prostitution, early marriage, begging and working for exploitative wages. The World Food Programme is implementing a large-scale food voucher programme and other organisations are providing household items and cash support. Some agencies manage work creation and training schemes. However, even before the crisis, employment in the refugee-hosting areas was hard to



Tents in the grounds of a mosque provide shelter for Syrian refugee families in Lebanon.

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come by. Now business opportunities have decreased and the number of residents has increased massively; in some areas it is estimated that there are more refugees than residents. With the best will (and practice) in the world, it is inconceivable that income-generation programmes will help more than a tiny proportion of the refugees.

Many people's savings are exhausted. They move onto the streets in the towns or into the shanty settlements that are springing up all over the Bekaa Valley and the north. UNHCR has estimated that there are 240 informal settlements in the Bekaa alone, ranging in size from less than 10 tents to more than 100. The settlements receive little aid (because of lack of capacity rather than lack of will). They are unsanitary. With summer approaching (and temperatures possibly nearing 40°C) health problems are inevitable and there is a real danger of epidemic disease.

If the system is unable to cope with the current refugee in-flows, what will happen if the feared and much talked-about "mass influx" occurs? This is a scenario in which hundreds of thousands of people arrive in Lebanon over the course of a few days. Such a scenario is entirely plausible. It could occur if fighting in Damascus intensifies, forcing whole sectors of the city to evacuate, or if Jordan were to close its borders, reducing people's options for escape.

The current approach – renovating individual shelters, subsidising households' expenditure, etc – would not be able to respond quickly enough to this scenario, even if there were the capacity (which there is not). We must consider alternative options and at this point it is hard to avoid the idea of camps.

### Camps: forbidden but inevitable

It is important to state that none of the policymakers in Lebanon favours camps as a first or even a second resort. The government has forbidden camps, a policy strongly supported by UNHCR. All agree that, given the choice, it is better for refugees to be integrated within communities.

One of the most compelling arguments against camps is that they take away refugees' opportunity to manage their own lives. However, it is inconceivable that enough jobs could be generated to provide sustainable livelihoods for a meaningful proportion of the refugee population and in these circumstances refugees have little opportunity to control their lives. Inevitably refugees will be dependent on some form of welfare support for the duration of their stay in Lebanon. There is little social connection between the shanty settlements and local communities.

The fact is that camps – in some guise or other – are inevitable. This has been recognised by some government ministers, who have made public personal pronouncements to that effect. Camps can accommodate large numbers of people and can be constructed relatively quickly once land has been identified. This last point is important as Lebanon is a small country and there is not much vacant land. Land-owners must agree to lease their land and communities have opinions about the establishment of camps in their vicinity.

There is also the issue of cost. We often hear that it is more expensive to accommodate refugees in camps than in the community but the current approach is expensive. The direct costs of rent, food, heating, health care and all the other essential living expenses must be covered. It is extremely expensive to provide health care to such a dispersed population. Then there are the costs to refugees' dignity and safety that come from the coping strategies that they cannot avoid. Finally (and very significantly) there are the costs to the host communities – lost income due to lower wages, more competition for jobs and the deterioration of services due to over-demand.



UNHCR/S. Malkawi

Actually the aid community, and the refugees, have no choice in the matter. De facto camps are springing up all over the country (the shanty settlements mentioned above). These are expanding in size and number. We will see more aid going to these settlements, as informal settlements have been prioritised in government and UN planning. But it will be impossible to intervene in so many small settlements, spread over such a large area. Aid agencies will focus on the largest settlements and those with the most extreme needs, drawing people to these settlements. This is a reality that we need to address systematically; it will not go away.

A shift in government policy to allow a certain number of properly planned camps is essential. This will enable aid organisations and municipalities to plan and construct camps properly, avoiding the chaotic expansion that we are currently seeing. It is also crucial that aid is shared across refugee and host populations. This is only fair; needs within Lebanese communities are similar to those faced by refugees. If carefully targeted, it will also reduce local inter-communal tension.

The camps issue has polarised debate within Lebanon and outside. But it is not an either/or situation. In order to address such enormous needs we need to combine approaches. This entails continuing with the existing approach but enhancing it with camps and other alternatives. With existing options saturated, more refugees arriving, and tensions within communities growing, we must be creative.

### What next?

Lebanon is inextricably caught up in Syrian affairs. The country is not merely mopping up the mess caused by the war in Syria but it is also moving rapidly into its own internal crisis. Unless we see decisive action by Lebanese politicians and international donors it is hard to see how we can avoid this. The population figures quoted above speak for themselves. Add to this the shelling of northern Lebanon from within Syria, the proxy war intermittently waged in Tripoli and political paralysis at

the central level, and it is easy to see why many Lebanese fear for their country.

The severity and urgency of the situation must be recognised. Lebanese ministers need to take tough decisions (among other things, about camps) and re-organise the priorities within their ministries. The refugee crisis cuts across political blocs and politicians of all persuasions have to recognise this.

At the practical level, ministries, UN agencies and NGOs could all be more efficient and pragmatic. They must work together towards an agreed (but flexible) set of objectives. They must be creative, continually looking for ways to address problems as they emerge and change.

There is an enormous need for funds. The Government of Lebanon and the UN estimate costs of the existing operation (even without a sudden influx) as over one billion dollars up to the end of 2013. It is highly unlikely that anything close to the amount that is needed will be forthcoming. Overt recognition of this fact and careful targeting of funds could at least address the most severe needs and reduce tension within communities. Recent government and UN plans emphasise the need to help host as well as refugee communities; this policy needs to be endorsed and funded by donors.

The crisis in Lebanon cannot be solved with humanitarian assistance. But flexible and well-targeted aid can reduce the impact of the political crisis. The government and aid agencies must respond to the ever-changing environment with carefully considered policy shifts of the sort suggested here.

*Jeremy Loveless* [jeremy.loveless@icloud.com](mailto:jeremy.loveless@icloud.com) is a freelance consultant who worked as an advisor to the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and the Lebanese government between November 2012 and May 2013. The views expressed in this article are entirely his own and do not necessarily reflect those either of DFID or of the Government of Lebanon.