



HUMAN RIGHTS DEVELOPMENTS IN A WEEK

07 - 11 AUGUST, 2023



Human Rights are inherent to all human beings, regardless of the nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, language or any other status without discrimination. These rights are all universal, inalienable, interrelated, interdependent and indivisible.

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LEBANON

Monday
07 August 2023

Lebanon's food insecurity persists as economic crisis continues

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) released a new analysis of food insecurity in Lebanon. In the current analysis period between May and October 2023, around 1.4 million persons (25%) residing in Lebanon are experiencing high levels of acute food insecurity (“crisis” or “emergency”), including 112,000 people (2%) in an “emergency” situation. Differences between groups are notable. For example, 21% of the Lebanese population are in a crisis or emergency situation, compared to 36% of Syrian refugees. IPC explains this gap by the “legal barriers [which] continue to hinder the access of Syrian and Palestine refugees to formal employment, which result in their engagement in informal labour, if any, leading to exploitative working conditions, lower wages, and lack of legal protection”. Moreover, the humanitarian aid which Syrian and Palestine refugees are reliant on does not cover the minimum requirements to meet food and other basic needs. Differences are also observable between regions, with the highest food insecurity for Lebanese being observed in Akkar, Baalbek, El Hermel, el Minieh-Dennie, and Tripoli. For Syrian refugees, the highest food insecurity was observed in Akkar, Baalbek, El Hermel, El Minieh-Dennie, Tripoli, West Bekaa and Zahle, where 40 to 45% of Syrian refugees were in a situation of “crisis” or “emergency”. However, this new analysis shows an improvement in the food security situation in Lebanon. The total population classified in a situation of “crisis” or “emergency” has declined from 37% to 25% of the total population. According to the study, the reasons for this improvement include the eased and greater access to USD, price stability in USD, and more employment opportunities.

Child abuse, abandonment surging in Lebanon, says UNICEF

UNICEF reports a “distressing” surge in various forms of child abuse, including neglect, physical and sexual abuse, and child abandonment in Lebanon, driven by the financial crisis’ impact on families. Impoverished families have resorted to abandoning infants in the streets, where they face a higher risk of abduction. Such a situation is described as “worrying” and “expected to increase in future” by UNICEF. In the past weeks, the media reported several cases of child abandonment. High unemployment and soaring prices have made parents struggling “to put food on the table”. UNICEF also reports its concerns over neglect, stating that “as parents and caregivers are overwhelmed by the challenging circumstances, [they] are primarily focused on survival and providing for their families. As a result, many children are left without adequate care and supervision”. UNICEF also observed an alarming increase in cases of sexual abuse and exploitation of children, as 9% of households in Lebanon had working children, a figure higher in Syrian refugee households compared to Lebanese ones.

Tuesday
08 August 2023

Amnesty International calls on Parliament to reform insult and defamation laws

Amnesty International launches a new campaign, called #MyOpinionIsNotACrime, to call on the Lebanese Parliament to abolish all laws that criminalize insult and defamation. Amnesty highlights “a spate of prosecutions of those critical of political, security, judicial, and religious figures in the country”. The recent case of journalist Dima Sadek, sentenced to 1 year in prison and a LBP 110 million fine, is “an illustration of how archaic criminal laws are being weaponized to punish or silence dissent”, and “are designed to protect those in power from all forms of criticism”. Many journalists, even if not sentenced, are being summoned to appear before security forces, in particular the Cybercrimes Bureau of the Internal Security Forces, after complaints of high-ranking officials, used “as a means of retaliation, harassment or intimidation against their critics”. Amnesty calls for the abrogation of the criminal insult and defamation provisions appearing in the Penal Code, the Publications Law and the Military Code of Justice, as they fail to meet international human rights law. Amnesty further argues that “civil defamation and criminal incitement laws are sufficient to protect people’s reputations and maintain public order”.

UNHCR agrees to provide Lebanon with data on Syrian refugees

The caretaker Minister of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants, Bouhabib, announced that, after one year of negotiations, the Lebanese government and the UNHCR reached an agreement to share new UN “data on all the Syrian refugees residing on Lebanese territories” with the Lebanese authorities. The data will be transmitted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs within the next 3 months and will be used by the General Security to crosscut the border crossings from and to Syria with the list of individuals benefiting from UNHCR assistance. Lance Bartholomeusz, General Counsel and Head of Legal Affairs Service at UNHCR, said that “the Lebanese government is committed not to use any data that is shared for purposes that violate the international law; it has reaffirmed its commitment to the principle of non-refoulement”. However, such a commitment is light, as Lebanese authorities deported at least 1,800 persons between April and July 2023, as reported by Human Rights Watch. Moreover, the Lebanese law regulating the protection of personal data does not fit with international protection standards.

Wednesday
09 August 2023

Minister of Culture bans ‘Barbie’ movie

Caretaker Minister of Culture, Mohamed al-Mortada, announced that he would request for the ‘Barbie’ movie to be banned from theaters in Lebanon. According to him, the film “promotes homosexuality and transgenderism”, and “contradicts the moral and faith values and the established principles in Lebanon.” The General Security was asked to prevent the screening of the film. The movie has also sparked controversy in other Middle Eastern countries, which objected to its feminist overtones and questioning of patriarchal norms. The announcement has been criticized as contravening with the freedom of expression and publication. Analysts added that politicians from all sects are targeting LGBT people and feminists to draw attention away from the economic and political crisis. “The entire system realizes that they are impotent to solve all the major issues, so they are trying to find scapegoats, which is either refugees, sexual minorities, or a movie as innocent as Barbie”, said Karim Bitar, teacher at Saint Joseph University. Other movies are regularly banned in Lebanon. In June, the new Spider-Man was banned over a transgender pride flag briefly appearing in the background of a scene.

Thursday
10 August 2023

Riad Salameh fails to appear before indictment chamber

Beirut's Indictment Chamber postponed a hearing of former Central Bank governor Riad Salameh after it was unable to locate him to notify him of the scheduled questioning on Wednesday. The 3 police stations tasked with the delivery of the official summons to Salameh could not find him at his residences. Investigating Judge Abou Samra released Salameh, asking him to remain at the disposal of the courts. However, this decision was appealed by Hélène Iskandar, head of the State legal department, to protect the interests of the State and further interrogate him. The decision was also overturned by the Indictment Chamber. Consequently, Investigative Judge Abou Samra is no longer in charge of the case, and the domestic probe on Salameh is suspended, potentially in the long term.

2 dead in clashes after Hezbollah truck crashes

On Wednesday night, clashes erupted near Kahaleh, after a truck crashed. According to the Lebanese army, the vehicle, which belonged to Hezbollah, was carrying "munitions" and was subsequently brought to an Army barrack. After it crashed, the truck was surrounded by Hezbollah operatives who were escorting the vehicle. Hezbollah reported that "militia elements" were attempting "to take control" of the truck. The situation escalated, leading to gunshots and 2 deaths, one Hezbollah member and one villager of Kahaleh. The road was blocked by local residents. The army was deployed during the night to calm the situation and ensure it could be further investigated. On Thursday morning, several security agencies were present in the area to conduct the investigation.

Canada, UK and US sanction ex-central bank chief Salameh

Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States announced coordinated sanctions against Riad Salameh and relatives, less than 2 weeks after the end of his term at the head of the Central Bank. The US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said in a statement that Salameh's "corrupt and unlawful actions have contributed to the breakdown of the rule of law in Lebanon". In particular, the OFAC highlights the "variety of unlawful self-enrichment schemes" that Salameh and his relatives organized, therefore contributing "to Lebanon's endemic corruption and perpetuated the perception that elites in Lebanon need to abide by the same rules that apply to all Lebanese people". The sanctions freeze any assets of Salameh and his associates based in Canada, the UK or the US, and prohibits transactions between them and citizens or businesses of the three countries. Though the list of relatives targeted by the sanctions slightly differ between the three countries, the latter all target the same \$300 million suspected to have been stolen to the Central Bank by Salameh and his relatives. The sanctions are a warning to the political ruling class that they might face similar sanctions. The European Parliament called on the EU to adopt sanctions targeting officials obstructing the presidential elections and the Beirut Blast probe. Moreover, the international group on Lebanon, which includes Egypt, France, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the US, also threatened to take targeted similar measures.

Friday
11 August 2023

Finance Minister receives final BDL audit report

Caretaker Finance Minister Youssef Khalil was given the forensic audit of the Central Bank accounts, carried out by the Alvarez & Marsal firm. He later transferred the document to caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati, which then sent it to the cabinet ministers, the office of the presidency, and the Parliament's secretariat general. A letter stressing on the confidentiality clause in the contract between the Lebanese state and Alvarez & Marsal was attached to the report. The audit is intended to trace the origin of transactions recorded in the institution's balance sheet in order to detect any fraud. The consulting firm was missioned in 2020 to conduct the audit but could only start its work in 2022, as BDL initially refused to provide the requested information. On Monday, August 7, the caretaker Finance Minister gave Mikati audits reports executed several years ago by other firms, which reported that BDL had not complied with international standards and had not used consistent accounting methods.

UNRWA reports remaining tensions in Ein el-Hilweh

Despite fighting having ceased on August 3, "tensions remain high in those sectors of the camp in which the fighting was centered". According to UNRWA, such a situation "is inhibiting humanitarian access". Armed fighters are reportedly still deployed, including around UNRWA schools and camp services office. Such deployment "prevented UNRWA staff from accessing these installations" and hinders the return of some residents to their homes, after thousands were displaced by the fighting. Approximately 65% of the camp's total area remain without the access of UNRWA and other humanitarian organizations. A security assessment of the presence of unexploded ordinances is yet to be conducted. Heavy fighting occurred in the camp during several days between several Palestinian groups, killing 13, wounding dozens, and displacing thousands.



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