



Reports monitoring covid-19 pandemic in countries and regions of the Global South Nº 5

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Syrian refugees in Lebanon are increasingly vulnerable

Following the outbreak of the Syrian war, 4.9 million people fled their country in search of exile. Of these, 95% settled in countries bordering Syria: Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. The economic and demographic capacity of these countries for absorbing this volume of refugees was insufficient. This insufficiency has been further accentuated by the covid-19 crisis.

Lebanon, a country still reeling from the consequences of a long civil war (1975-1990), officially hosted 1.1 million Syrian refugees according to the *European Commission* and 1.8 million according to the *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)* (European Commission, 2014; UNHCR, 2015). With an area equivalent to a third of Catalonia and a population of 6 million people, it is estimated that 1 in every 4 inhabitants in Lebanon is a refugee, including both Palestinians and Syrians.

However, Lebanon did not sign the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951 or the Protocol that ratified the Convention in 1967. Therefore, the country has no specific legislation for refugees which leaves them in a situation of legal insecurity. Solely in 2003, Lebanon signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the UNHCR, in which the last is responsible for assisting refugees during their stay in the country and jointly processing temporary stay permits (UNHCR, 2004).

From the beginning of the Syrian war until 2015, Lebanon allowed the entry of Syrian people in the country, but in 2015 closed its borders and stopped granting temporary stay permits. Syrian refugees who entered the country after 2015 are thus exposed to situations that violate their rights such as mobility constraints, the impossibility of registering births and marriages or the right to access education and health systems as they are afraid of being discovered by the authorities.

In Lebanon, 60% of Syrians live in cities and 40% in informal settlements mostly in the Bekaa Valley. In 2019, the *United Nations* vulnerability assessment report on Syrian refugees in Lebanon estimated that 70% of Syrian people live below the poverty line, rising up to 90% for those living in informal settlements. These numbers are estimated to have worsened with the current crisis.

At a very early stage of covid-19 pandemic, as we explained in the previous report, the country implemented containment measures and forced all kinds of businesses to stop. This restriction of movement and consequent paralysis of the economy has been especially severe for refugees living in informal settlements who are becoming more vulnerable by the day.

Both the Lebanese authorities and international organizations took into account the domino effect that could be caused if one inhabitant of a settlement were to contract the disease:

everyone would contract it. However, the measures taken in some municipalities have been highly restrictive and are having disastrous consequences for the population: 21 Municipalities in the Bekaa Valley, motivated on the one hand by statements by Lebanese President *Michel Aoun* saying that Syrian refugees have pushed basic services, including health services, to the limit and on the other hand by the stigmatization of their lack of hygiene, have imposed curfews on Syrians in their municipalities. As a result, they can only leave their settlements between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m. to do "basic need" tasks such as buying food, going to the pharmacy or working. If they are seen outside these hours, they may be stopped by the police and asked for documentation. As many refugees do not have residence permits, they do not leave the settlements for fear of being arrested and deported.

It is worth mentioning that in 2019, when Syria's war was supposedly coming to an end (before Turkey started to attack Northern Syria) the Lebanese government practiced deportations to Syria of Syrian nationals without temporary residence permits (Amnesty International, 2019).

Médecins Sans Frontières reported that the number of Syrian nationals visiting authorized medical facilities has decreased by 30% since March and considers this decrease to be related to the above-mentioned restrictions.

In addition, in many settlements, the entry of NGOs has been restricted, for example by limiting educational or leisure activities to children. The only organization allowed to enter is the *UNHCR*, which is carrying out information campaigns about the pandemic, providing masks and soap and even setting up tents as isolation facilities in case of contagion. They are also locating people with medical and nursing training within the settlements to practice under their umbrella if necessary.

The curfew of the 21 Municipalities is affecting the access to the little available work to refugees in the affected areas. Several witnesses have told *Human Rights Watch* that they are afraid to leave their settlements and to go to work because of the unclear municipal curfew and the fear of being arrested and deported.

Therefore, their already vulnerable situation has become even more vulnerable with the pandemic. One example is the food vouchers that *UNHCR* distributes monthly (equivalent to \$173 per family and \$27 per person) and which are often the only economic source for the families. Currently, there are refugees who had to sell these vouchers in order to pay the rent and the expenses of the tents they live in in order not to be evicted. According to the 2019 *United Nations* vulnerability assessment report on Syrian refugees in Lebanon, 96% of refugees were in debt. This situation is estimated to have worsened with the covid-19 pandemic.

Syrian refugees have told the authors of this report that they are more afraid of the virus than they were of war: "you hear an explosion and you can run away from it, but the virus is like a silent weapon". They are well aware of the danger to all their neighbours if the virus were to reach the settlements as there is not enough space for isolation and they cannot afford to be hospitalized. However, they also feel that their economic situation is becoming more vulnerable every day and begin to be more afraid of hunger than of the virus.

References:

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The research group BIOCOS-SC from the Polytechnic University of Catalonia is in contact with different research groups and governmental offices in order to jointly predict the evolution of the pandemic covid-19. Moreover, we follow up local media in 35 African countries and 9 Latino American countries and complemented it with interviews to field experts.

<https://biocossc.upc.edu/en/covid-19>