



Written testimony of

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Introduction

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), I would like to express our appreciation for the opportunity to appear before you today to address the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and the challenges being borne by their host communities. I would also like to request that my full written statement be submitted for the record.

I would like to sincerely thank the people and the Government of the United States for their tremendous support and leadership in relation to this refugee response. Without this support, the significant achievements that have been made in providing life-saving protection and assistance to the hundreds of thousands Syrians that have been hosted in Lebanon would not have been possible. I thank you for this opportunity to testify and to explain further on the overall needs in Lebanon.

Overview

The humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria) remains of very grave concern with domestic, regional, and growing international consequences. As the conflict enters its fourth year, insecurity, generalized violence, and specific persecution continue to force the people of Syria to seek safety and protection.

During 2013, the numbers of Syrians displaced within their homeland and seeking refuge in the five neighboring countries increased dramatically. With no immediate prospect for peace in sight, the combination of the conflict, deteriorating economic opportunities, and shrinking social services are likely to generate further levels of displacement within Syria and the region.

Few refugee crises of recent decades have occurred at the same speed as Syria. None have been on the same scale and complexity. As of the beginning of December 2013, a total of nearly 2.2 million refugees had been registered in the Arab Republic of Egypt (Egypt), the Republic of Iraq (Iraq), the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (Jordan), the Lebanese Republic (Lebanon), and the Republic of Turkey (Turkey).¹ This figure does not include Palestinian and other refugees displaced from Syria, nor the hundreds of thousands who may not have registered or who were already outside Syria when the conflict began- a total that could exceed 3 million people. In addition, over 31,000 Syrians have sought asylum in more than 90 countries outside the region.

In 2013 alone, some 1.7 million refugees have been registered, an increase of over 340 per cent compared to the previous year. Statistics alone do not reveal the full extent of the Syrian conflict. The spill-over effects continue to escalate and deepen across the region, generating far-

¹ As of 2 December 2013, registered refugees in the region consist of Lebanon (832,005), Jordan (560,058), Turkey (527,307), Iraq (208,054), and Egypt (128,158) - UNHCR data

reaching political, economic, and social consequence. Overall approximately 80 per cent of the refugees across the region – the numbers vary by country - are not living in organised camps but in cities, towns, and villages, many in informal settlements. The enormous generosity of the Governments and the peoples of the neighboring countries have come at a considerable cost. Government resources have been depleted and the coping capacities of local authorities and populations have been stretched to the limit. Yet notwithstanding the exceptional level of financial support from the donor community, the situation of many refugees remains precarious.

The deteriorating conditions inside Syria are reflected in current arrival trends across the region. UNHCR data indicates that since May 2013, a net average of 127,000 people are registered each month. Based on an analysis of population movements within and from Syria, and the monthly registration average, there could be over 4 million refugees in the region by the end of 2014. This would make Syrians the largest refugee population in the world.

The most dramatic repercussions from the conflict including the refugee movements within the region have been on Lebanon. The Economic and Social Impact Assessment of the Conflict in Syria on Lebanon carried out by the World Bank and the United Nations completed in September 2013 outlines the macro-economic and human development consequences in detail.² A few numbers from the report suffice to capture the enormous consequences of the conflict's impact. The cumulative losses in economic activity could reach an estimated US\$ 7.5 billion over the period 2012-14; the government has incurred an additional US\$ 1.1 billion in expenditure to meet the increase in demand for public services; the costs of stabilization to reinstate services to their pre-conflict level is estimated at US\$ 2.5 billion.

In view of the magnitude of the crisis and its macro-economic and development impact, the Government of Lebanon has recently endorsed a national Stabilization Plan as the overall framework for guiding the response to the country's needs. It consists of a four track Road Map that envisages immediate actions, medium to long term programs, structural support, and cooperation with the private sector. Track One of the Road Map sees both humanitarian and development interventions operating side-by-side to address high priority, immediate needs.

Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

Refugees from the conflict in Syria began arriving in Lebanon after March 2011, initially in modest numbers. By the end of 2011 only 5,000 Syrian refugees had been registered by UNHCR in Lebanon. In June 2012, a total of 25,000 Syrian refugees were registered. One year later, this figure had grown to over 500,000. Since the beginning of 2013 monthly registration, totals have risen sharply to average over 60,000 a month. Today, over 830,000 Syrians have been registered or are awaiting registration.

² *Economic and Social Impact Assessment of the Syrian Conflict in Lebanon* led by the World Bank and the United Nations, Report No. 81098, Washington D.C., September 2013.

Current projections foresee the number of registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon close to 900,000 persons by the end of 2013. This would then constitute approximately 23 % of the Lebanese population. Based on arrival trends in 2013, and a projection of the circumstances inside Syria, refugee arrivals could increase by an additional million persons in 2014. If current fighting along Syria's border continues the figure could be even higher.

The projection of arrival trends for 2014 takes into account a number of important variables at work within the region and inside Syria itself. These include policy decisions by individual governments of the neighboring countries on border management and the measures they adopt for the maintenance and welfare of the refugee populations on their territory.

In Syria, the critical driver of internal displacement and forced migration will be the immediate violence and threats to life posed by the conflict. Decisions to leave the country will also be determined by the proximity of violence, economic coping strategies, perceptions of safety abroad, and connections with family members outside Syria.

The plight of Syrian refugees in the country is closely mirrored by the situation of other affected populations. There are currently 54,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS) in Lebanon and a further 20,000 Lebanese citizens who have returned from Syria.³ The Government of Lebanon estimates that there were upwards of 230,000 Syrians resident prior to the conflict.

The majority (c. 80%) of Syrian refugees arriving in Lebanon have originated from the central and western governorates of Homs, Aleppo, Hama, Idleb, and rural Damascus. The remaining 20% have come from Damascus itself, from Dara in the south, and from the north eastern governorates of Hassakah, Arraqa, and Deir-Az-Zour. Palestinian refugees from Syria have come primarily from Damascus and surrounding rural areas.⁴

The Government of Lebanon has generously maintained an open border policy since the beginning of the crisis and has permitted refugees to settle freely in different parts of the country. In addition, it has waived certain regulatory requirements and payments normally required of Syrian migrants.⁵ Refugees from Syria register in one of four centres established by UNHCR in Mount Lebanon, Zahle, Tripoli, and Tyre. A range of individual information and biodata is collected through interviews.

Registration is a critical protection tool. It entitles refugees to receive some individual basic assistance from aid agencies and provides them with documentation. In addition, project support

³ UNRWA data

⁴ Data from UNHCR, UNRWA

⁵ Palestinian refugees from Syria are permitted to enter on more restricted terms if they can establish they have existing family members in Lebanon.

is provided for food security, livelihoods, water and sanitation, and access to health and education. Palestinian refugees from Syria are recorded by UNRWA and in general have been accommodated and supported in camps through existing social service provision. Their arrival numbers are lower due to the government's policy of allowing access to only Palestinian refugees who can demonstrate family links to Lebanon.

A particular feature of the Syrian refugee population is its dispersal across 1,500 locations throughout Lebanon. The majority (65%) have settled in the North and North East (Bekaa) governorates but with growing numbers in Mount Lebanon, the South, and Beirut. This pattern is attributable principally to proximity to the Syrian border and to traditional cross border ties and relations.

To complement the quantitative data generated by the registration process, more analytical studies and surveys have been commissioned to assess vulnerability and to determine protection and material needs of the refugee population. A series of technical studies of important sectors (housing, education, health) have also been carried out. Indications of economic and social fragility among the refugee population are reflected in the depletion of assets, the range of extreme coping strategies, high levels of out of school children, poor and overcrowded living conditions, and limited employment opportunities.

Humanitarian consequences and impact in Lebanon

While the numbers alone are staggering, they provide only a limited insight into the suffering, misery, and distress of the civilian population. Many refugees who have fled into Lebanon suffered multiple displacements within Syria prior to seeking safety outside their country. Refugees have lost family members and everything they once owned – homes, businesses, and livelihoods. Many bear the physical and emotional scars of being caught up in fighting and seeing family and friends killed or injured. Three quarters of them are women and children. Nearly one in five refugees is under the age of four. The children pay the hardest price of all, with millions of young lives shattered by this conflict. A large component of the future generation of an entire country faces hardship in exile.

The effects of the Syrian conflict and the resultant refugee crisis have also had particularly far reaching consequences for Lebanon and its people. The rapid increase in the overall population of a small country with a surface area of only 10,482 square kilometres has generated enormous challenges for the Government of Lebanon, its people, and the international assistance community.

The initial policy and operational responses of the Government of Lebanon and the international community focus primarily on the immediate humanitarian needs of the refugees from Syria. These were assessed and appeals for assistance have been launched under successive Regional

Response Plans (RRP). Under the guidance of the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) has been tasked with coordinating the assistance effort on the Government side, working in close collaboration with other Ministries and UNHCR.

As the impact of the Syrian conflict and the refugee crisis has spread and deepened across the country, its consequences for Lebanese communities have also grown. Increased pressures on the economy, service delivery, and the environment are most directly felt at local level. The large refugee presence, especially in many of the country's poorest regions, has heightened competition for scarce resources, employment, and access to limited social services.

The early arrival of refugees from Syria primarily affected border areas in the north and north east of the country, traditional destinations for Syrian migrant workers, notably in the agricultural sector. Pre-existing cross border economic, commercial, and social ties between Lebanese and Syrian communities eased their initial reception. Many refugees were hosted by Lebanese families who shared their homes and resources.

The Government of Lebanon has been reluctant to establish refugee camps for Syrian refugees. This, in part, reflects the remarkable absorptive capacity of Lebanese society, and in part, the permanence of the 12 official Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon which were established more than half a century ago and are home to 475,000 people.⁶

However, as the number of Syrian refugees has grown, local absorption capacities and response capabilities of communities, of municipalities and of humanitarian aid providers have come under increasing strain. Accommodation within individual family households has proved largely inadequate and unsustainable. The majority of refugees have found temporary solutions by renting rooms and apartments.

Unfortunately, these options are simply not affordable for many families, therefore a growing number have established themselves in informal settlements. Many have been obliged to share the same small apartments or space in unused buildings, garages, shops, and even animal sheds. Several thousand are staying in hastily erected tents and temporary shelters. A disquieting proportion lives in overcrowded and insecure conditions where sanitation is lacking and there is little protection from rain, wind and snow in the winter season.

As the conflict drags on, refugee savings are diminishing, their debts are increasing, and refugees face a constant struggle to cover the gap between their income and essential expenditure. They face difficulties securing regular employment and support from the aid community barely covers essential needs.

⁶ Data based on officially registered figures as of March 2013 – UNRWA data.

UNHCR data indicates that Syrian refugees are now present in more than 1,500 municipalities. In over 133 locations, Syrian refugees already account for more than 30% of the overall population. These are predominantly (75%) found in the North and North East (Bekaa). There is a strong coincidence of the large refugee presence with the documented levels of poverty among Lebanese communities. Thus the shift in the demographic balance has also been accompanied by a range of economic and social effects. The pressures on labour markets, services, and resources, and the resulting social tensions, have been captured in a series of assessments and studies undertaken by different aid organizations in 2012-2013.

The economic impact of the refugee crisis has been reflected in increased food prices, reduced employment opportunities, and higher rental costs. Social and environmental effects include reduced access to health care, overcrowded schools, deteriorating water quality, and inadequate waste management. The most adversely affected among the poorer Lebanese have been unskilled labourers and those in informal or irregular work.

The socio-economic consequences of the refugee crisis have also led to fragile inter-communal relations and discontent. Even if refugees are largely living in very basic and insecure circumstances themselves, Lebanese communities have widely attributed the decline in their own living standards to the refugee presence. Notwithstanding the efforts of the Lebanese authorities to highlight their concerns on this point, the fact that Syrian refugees have hitherto been the main beneficiaries of international and government assistance has also been a source of tension.

The full extent of the Syrian conflict on Lebanon and on the poorer Lebanese population has prompted an important shift in both policy and operational response on the part of the humanitarian assistance effort. Recognizing the need for a more balanced and comprehensive approach, greater attention and resources have been devoted to addressing both the country's overall requirements and the immediate needs of local Lebanese communities.

UNHCR in Lebanon

UNHCR has been present in Lebanon since 1963. The organization's role in the country has varied from supporting refugees, primarily Iraqi and Sudanese, to assisting internally displaced Lebanese. The political crisis in Syria turned violent in March 2011. It started to produce significant displacement of Syrians into Lebanon in early 2012. In response, UNHCR significantly scaled up its operation in the country to register and assist Syrian refugees and coordinate the inter-agency response to the needs of refugees and other affected populations.

UNHCR currently has five offices inside Lebanon in Beirut, Mount Lebanon, Zahle, Tyre, Tripoli, and Qubayat. There are over 430 UNHCR staff working throughout the country with projections for the workforce to grow to over 700 staff by early 2014 to meet existing needs. This will make UNHCR's operation in Lebanon our largest in the world.

In partnership with the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), UNHCR leads and coordinates an inter-agency response to the Syrian refugee situation in Lebanon, working closely with the central and local government authorities and our UN and NGO partners. The two largest partner programmes are that of the World Food Programme, which supplies food rations and vouchers to the refugees, and UNICEF, who provide child protection services, education, and water and sanitation.

UNHCR's program in Lebanon is one component of the wider Regional Response Plan (RRP) established to meet the challenges of the refugee crisis. The United States Government has contributed US \$112 million to this effort inside Lebanon. Its key objectives are protection, life-saving assistance, community support, emergency preparedness, and information management. In 2013, the Lebanese component of the Regional Response Plan has generated impressive support. The proposed budget has been increased to over US\$ 253 million, representing almost 70% of the proposed Operations Plan.

The programme is overseen and managed from UNHCR's Country Office in Beirut and its five offices around the country. It is organized as an inter-agency response around the following key sectors - protection, education, health, shelter, water and sanitation, food and Non-Food Items. A task force mandated to organize the international response to host communities is co-chaired by the Ministry of Social Affairs, UNHCR and UNDP.

Despite the pressures felt by the Government and the local populations, the Lebanese authorities have consistently kept their borders open, thereby permitting access to safe territory to refugees. This has permitted UNHCR to steadily increase its registration capacities and reduce the waiting time. This, in turn, has provided critical data and information allowing refugees, particularly the most vulnerable, to be better served by humanitarian agencies. Such information will grow in importance as the programme increasingly focuses on those with the most critical needs.

Despite the highly dispersed character of the population's settlement pattern across the country, and the sharp logistical challenges this represents for the humanitarian response, some 195,000 refugees have so far been provided with shelter assistance including through weatherproofing, the provision of financial assistance to cover rent, and the rehabilitation of collective shelters. These efforts are complemented by the distribution of stoves, fuel and blankets which are underway to ensure that 450,000 people find warmth this coming winter.

Significant work has been undertaken with the Ministry of Public Health through its public health facilities to provide refugees with access to primary and secondary health care. So far, despite the high cost of medical care in a highly privatized health care system, some 440,000

individuals have been assisted with primary health care. A further 35,000 people have been assisted with emergency and life-saving secondary health care.

UNHCR and partners have also worked with the Ministry of Public Health to contain outbreaks and reinforce routine immunisation programmes. To date, some 730,000 children have been vaccinated for measles, a further 230,000 children received oral polio vaccines, and the country's routine immunization programme was strengthened with cold chain equipment, vaccines and staff training.

Education remains one of the key sectors for the inter-agency response. It has far reaching consequences for the future of Syria. With 280,000 school age Syrian refugee children currently registered with UNHCR, there are now nearly as many Syrian refugee children as Lebanese children attending public school. Agencies are striving to increase support to public schools to enable 100,000 refugee children to enroll during this academic year, a threefold increase on refugee enrollment in 2012-2013. A significant number of refugee children will be unable to access formal education. In consequence, agencies are increasingly focusing their efforts on non-formal education.

As the conflict in Syria drags on and refugees' resources are depleted, an increasing number of people are resorting to negative coping strategies, including prostitution and child marriage. Children are facing increased risks of abuse and exploitation as they are compelled to work, often in precarious conditions, to support their families. UNHCR and partners are seeing an increasing number of refugees with needs for counselling and other forms of specialised support.

Agencies are increasing outreach efforts to ensure that refugees most in need receive assistance. A network of over 100 refugee outreach volunteers has been created and trained to identify and report on individuals' vulnerabilities and protection risks. The network continues to be expanded and is anticipated to reach 400 by the end of 2014. Planning is also afoot to set up a network of 600 specialized refugee volunteers to identify and respond to needs in various sectors such as education, health and psycho-social needs.

Conclusion

Regrettably, the conflict in Syria shows no immediate signs of abating. The damage to the country's economy and infrastructure may already take decades to rebuild to pre-conflict levels. The death, injury, deprivation and loss will mark the civilian population for a generation or more. Re-establishing trust, social cohesion, and confidence in a now deeply fractured society will require perhaps even greater efforts than the rehabilitation of physical infrastructure. For refugees to return voluntarily in safety and dignity, peace and reconciliation will be the essential benchmarks.

In the history of refugee asylum and protection, few countries and few populations have demonstrated such profound generosity and paid such high costs for their humanitarian solidarity as Lebanon. As the conflict enters its fourth year, growing indications of another complex and protracted refugee situation are emerging.

UNHCR's High Commissioner has consistently called for the international community to match Lebanon's example by contributing even stronger support. The need for immediate humanitarian aid for a poor and increasingly impoverished refugee population will remain. Notwithstanding the robust performance of the Regional Response Plan to the refugee situation, humanitarian assistance alone cannot adequately address either the growing needs of the refugees or the impact of the conflict on Lebanon and its people. The early and welcome engagement of development agencies in highlighting the varied effects on Lebanon's economy and its social cohesion is to be welcomed. It is also an unprecedented sign of the gravity of the crisis that should not be ignored.