

UN unveils Emergency Response Plan for Lebanon

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The United Nations held a news conference Friday at the ESCWA offices to outline their Emergency Response Plan for Lebanon, seeking to provide essential support to 1.1 million of Lebanon's most vulnerable people.

The UN estimates that almost 2 million people are affected by the ongoing crises Lebanon is facing, and intends to facilitate a yearlong series of humanitarian programs to ease their suffering.

The plan, estimated to cost \$383 million, complements UNRWA and the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) programs for Syrian and Palestine refugees, under the leadership of the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) and the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT).

"In my recent field visits, I met children, young and old Lebanese men and women. Their stories were heartbreaking, sometimes outrageous and shocking," United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Lebanon Najat Rochdi said at the news conference. "I spoke with 15-year-old Chadi whose dream is simply to have a mobile phone and some decent clothes. 'I should be in school, studying, taking money from my parents and not the other way around,' he told me.

"I met breadwinner mothers who were 'ashamed; of waiting in lines to pick up their food parcel; never in their life have they depended on others to feed their children, they told me with tears triggered by feelings of despair,'" she added. "Yet, their main concern is to put food on the table and get a job that pays the rent. They worry about the safety of their children, about their education and their blurry future."

The severe depreciation of the Lebanese lira over the last two years has led to widespread shortages of electricity, water, health care, fuel and the ability to afford basic foodstuffs and services. The political deadlock over the past year exacerbated the issue further, as much needed reforms were put on hold for 13 months.

"The resilient people of Lebanon are now tired of being resilient, of thorny problems that life is throwing at them. They want simply to live in dignity," Rochdi said. "Many people find themselves in a situation not even conceivable a year ago as Lebanon was still considered a high middle-income country.

"The majority of Lebanese people are now living in poverty. In March 2021, 78 percent of the Lebanese population (3 million people) was estimated to live below the poverty line while 'extreme' poverty reached as high as 36 percent, which means 1.38 million Lebanese," she added. "Starvation has become a growing reality for thousands of people. According to a joint World Bank and WFP assessment, 22 percent of Lebanon's families – almost a quarter of the total – were unable to meet their dietary needs by end of 2020, while acute malnutrition rates among children aged 6 months to 5 years have substantially increased in 2019 and 2020, with infant and young child feeding practices falling short of the global standard. These numbers have surely soared in 2021."

Rochdi described the struggling health care sector and shortage of medicines, especially those for cancer and chronic life threatening diseases as a "death penalty" for all those whose lives depend heavily on medication.

Both health care workers and educators have been leaving the country in droves, seeking a better quality of life and a reasonable salary in other countries. Meanwhile, many families are unable to afford education fees for their children or the cost of a doctor's appointment.

“Children’s mental health is also at stake, with 32 percent of Lebanese children provided with psychosocial support at the beginning of 2021 compared to only 10 percent in 2020,” she said. “In parallel, the number of children engaged in child labor is dramatically increasing as one of the most flagrant negative coping mechanisms adopted by vulnerable families.

“Due to electricity shortage, water supply is on the verge of collapse and critical services are severely affected, including hospitals,” she added. “If the situation continues to worsen, up to 4 million people will potentially be affected by water shortages or be completely cut off from water, including 1 million refugees.”

An increase in illegal migration has been noted. Sea departures are on the rise and for refugees there is a considerable risk of chain refoulement.

The ERP was announced on Aug. 4, co-chaired UN–France conference on Lebanon, to address critical humanitarian needs among Lebanese and migrants that were not previously responded to.

It includes 119 projects targeting the sectors of education, food security, health, nutrition, water and sanitation, child protection and protection against gender-based violence. In response to the energy and fuel crisis, the plan also includes the establishment of a fuel supply chain to ensure the continuity of humanitarian work and to provide fuel, over a limited period of time, to critical health, water and sanitation establishments across Lebanon.

Rochdi stressed that the aid will be going directly to the beneficiaries, including the distribution of food and cash assistance to around 500,000 people, improved access to doctors and medicine in primary health care centers for around 250,000 people, the provision of legal aid and access to safe houses for victims of home violence, the distribution of sanitary products for women and girls and 100,000 hygiene kits to protect families from COVID19.

About 100,000 children will be provided with psychosocial support and 400,000 young children, pregnant and lactating mothers will receive nutritional surveillance and provision of food supplements, as well as distance and in-person learning for children.

So far, the ERP has received donor pledges for \$370 million, as well as \$10 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund in New York and the Lebanon Humanitarian Fund managed by OCHA, which was disbursed early September to immediately finance the fuel delivery component of the plan.

The largest expenditures of the budget has been allotted to food security and health related problems.

Rochdi said that while the money will enter Lebanon through the Lebanese banking system, it is only the condition that no losses will be incurred due to the multiple withdrawal rates and limits placed by banks.

“There is absolutely no way, for any one of us to accept that any percentage goes to the commercial bank,” she said. “This funding is not here to support the banking sector, it’s not here to support anything but people in need and when it comes to humanitarian associations we’ve been very clear ... that this is a red line. I consider it my duty that the full value of the money is transferred where it needs to be.

“Humanitarian action is meant to be by nature short term, temporary and unsustainable. It primarily aims at saving lives and alleviating the suffering of the people. It is not meant to solve the root causes and drivers of a crisis. Only a sustainable solution can give back the pride and dignity to those impacted,” she added. “Throughout my interactions with the Lebanese authorities, including the new Government, I have stressed the fundamental responsibility of the government, as the principal duty-bearer, to ensure that people have safe, sustained and dignified access to basic social services. These are legitimate and inalienable human rights.”