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The State of the World's Human Rights; Lebanon 2023

Cross-border hostilities between the Lebanon-based armed group Hizbullah and Israeli forces escalated following attacks by Palestinian armed groups in Gaza on southern Israel on 7 October. During the ongoing economic crisis, the Lebanese government failed to adequately protect people's rights to health, social security and housing, which had particularly devastating impacts on marginalized groups. Impunity remained widespread, including for those responsible for the fatal 2020 Beirut port explosion. The authorities escalated the use of criminal defamation and insult laws to stifle freedom of expression and retaliate against critics, particularly targeting journalists, trade unionists and activists. Authorities systematically attacked the rights of LGBTI people. Some authorities stoked hostility towards refugees.

Background

The impacts of the economic crisis that erupted in 2019 deepened. The authorities' failure to address the crisis left millions of people unable to access their rights, including to food, water, education and health. According to UNICEF, 86% of households were unable to afford essentials. On 15 September, the International Monetary Fund criticized the "lack of action" by Lebanese authorities on urgent economic reforms necessary to unlock a multi-billion-dollar aid package.

Political deadlock hampered decision-making: government continued to function in a caretaker capacity and parliament failed to elect a president.

From 7 October, cross-border hostilities in southern Lebanon escalated significantly, with shelling by Israeli forces killing at least 20 civilians, and weapons fired by Hizbullah and other Lebanon-based armed groups at northern Israel killing at least four Israeli civilians.

Violations of international humanitarian law

Israeli forces

The Israeli army fired artillery shells containing white phosphorus in military operations along Lebanon's southern border between 10 and 16 October. Amnesty International called for an attack on Dhayra town on 16 October to be investigated as a possible war crime.¹

Three Lebanese journalists in southern Lebanon were killed while covering the hostilities. On 13 October, Israeli artillery fired into southern Lebanon killed Reuters journalist Issam Abdallah and injured six other journalists. Amnesty International verified over 100 videos and photographs, analysed weapon fragments from the site, and interviewed nine witnesses. The findings indicate that the group was visibly identifiable as journalists and that the Israeli military knew or should have known that they were civilians, yet attacked them anyway in two separate strikes 37 seconds apart. Amnesty International concluded that both strikes were likely a direct attack on civilians that must be investigated as a war crime.² On 21 November, reporter Farah Omar and cameraman Rabih Maamari from the TV station Al Mayadeen, and their local guide, Hussein Akil, were killed in a strike in Teir Harfa village, Tyre district.

Right to health

The government failed to alleviate the impacts of the economic crisis on people's right to health. After it lifted subsidies on most medications in 2021 and 2022, prices rocketed. As a result, demand for free or low-cost medication provided by public primary healthcare centres increased drastically, while government funding of the centres decreased, denying people access to vital medication. Marginalized groups suffered disproportionately.

An Amnesty International investigation published in June found that a rapid rise in the number of deaths in custody between 2019 and 2022 was partly due to a lack of adequate healthcare.³ Prisons had too few medical staff and lacked basic medication, and the government failed to pay private and public hospitals to treat prisoners, sometimes leading hospitals to turn away prisoners even when emergency treatment was required.

Right to social security

The government still had not adopted a universal social protection programme or taken the steps necessary to fund such a programme. A significant portion of the population, particularly those working in the informal sector, had no form of social protection, and the value of assistance for those eligible was often inadequate to meet basic needs. Lebanon's limited poverty-targeting cash assistance programmes were unable to help a large number of people in dire need.

Right to housing

The impact of the February earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria was felt across Lebanon. Many residents, particularly those in Lebanon's coastal city of Tripoli, already lived in buildings at risk of collapse. Government promises to assess the structural integrity of buildings and cover the cost of alternative housing for three months for people whose homes were deemed to be at risk did not materialize. On 16 October, a building in Mansouriyeh town in the Metn district of Mount Lebanon governorate collapsed, killing eight people.

Impunity

Impunity remained widespread.

The investigation into the 2020 Beirut port explosion remained suspended since December 2021 due to legal complaints filed against the investigation's judges by politicians summoned for interrogation or charged in relation to the case.⁴ On 25 January, two days after lead judge Tarek Bitar tried to resume the investigation, the general prosecutor filed charges against him, including "usurping power", and ordered the release of everyone detained in connection with the explosion. The Beirut Bar Association and the Lebanese Judges Association said the decision to release all remaining suspects was illegal. In March, Australia delivered a joint statement on behalf of 38 states at the UN Human Rights Council expressing concern that the domestic investigation into the explosion had been "hampered by systemic obstruction, interference, intimidation, and a political impasse."

There was no meaningful progress in the investigation into the assassination of activist and intellectual Lokman Slim, who was found shot dead on 4 February 2021 in his car in southern Lebanon.⁵ On 2 February, UN human rights experts expressed deep concern at the lack of progress to ensure accountability for the crime.

Freedom of expression

Authorities increasingly used criminal defamation and insult laws to stifle criticism and retaliate against, harass or intimidate their critics.

Amnesty International documented the cases of 10 journalists, trade unionists and activists summoned for interrogation pursuant to criminal insult and defamation cases filed against them by powerful individuals because of their criticism. Security and military agencies who summoned and interrogated those targeted failed to safeguard their due process rights and engaged in intimidating behaviour, such as threats of detention or pressure to sign pledges to stop criticizing the complainant. The defamation and insult provisions appear in the Penal Code, the Publications Law and the Military Code of Justice, and are punishable by up to three years' imprisonment.

On 11 July, journalist Dima Sadek was sentenced to one year in prison and fined on criminal charges of defamation and incitement after she criticized on Twitter (now known as X) members of a political party.

LGBTI people's rights

Authorities systematically attacked the human rights of LGBTI people and incited violence against them.

In July, nine parliamentarians submitted a draft law to repeal Article 534 of the Penal Code, which punishes "all sexual intercourse contrary to the order of nature" with up to one year's imprisonment and a fine. In response, in August, a parliamentarian and the minister of culture submitted two separate draft laws that would explicitly criminalize consensual same-sex sexual relations and the "promotion of homosexuality".

On 23 August, members of Soldiers of God, a Christian radical group, attacked people attending a drag event in a bar in Beirut and threatened further violence against LGBTI people. The Internal Security Forces arrived during the attack, but did not arrest anyone.

On 25 August, 18 media organizations issued a joint statement against the crackdown on freedoms, including the targeting of LGBTI people.

On 5 September, the Coalition to Defend Freedom of Expression in Lebanon, which comprises 15 Lebanese and international organizations including Amnesty International, urged the authorities to immediately scrap the proposed anti-LGBTI laws and end the attacks on rights and freedoms.⁶

Refugees' and migrants' rights

Lebanon continued to host the largest number of refugees per capita globally, with an estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees, including 795,322 registered with UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, and 13,715 refugees of other nationalities. According to UNHCR, 90% of Syrian refugees were living in extreme poverty.

In the first half of the year, the hostile environment for refugees was exacerbated by an alarming rise in anti-refugee rhetoric, in some cases fuelled by local authorities and politicians.

In April and May, the Lebanese Armed Forces raided houses of Syrian refugees, most of them registered with or known to UNHCR, across Lebanon, including in Mount Lebanon, Jounieh, Qob Elias and Bourj Hammoud, and immediately deported most of them. Some were arrested or disappeared upon their return to Syria. Deportees told Amnesty International they were not afforded the right to challenge their deportation or argue their case for protection.

On 11 May, 20 national and international organizations called on the authorities to "halt summary deportations to Syria, which are in breach of the principle of non-refoulement". They also called on

the international community to step up its assistance to Lebanon and resettle more refugees living in Lebanon.

In September, the Lebanese Armed Forces raided refugee camps in the Bekaa region and Aarsal town and confiscated internet boxes, solar panels and batteries.

Right to a healthy environment

Lebanese authorities failed to transition away from heavy fuel oil to power its plants in line with the government's 2022 Electricity Plan. Meanwhile, widespread state electricity shortages forced people to rely on expensive and highly polluting private diesel generators.

1. [“Lebanon: Evidence of Israel’s unlawful use of white phosphorus in southern Lebanon as cross-border hostilities escalate”, 31 October](#)
2. [“Lebanon: Deadly Israeli attack on journalists must be investigated as a war crime”, 7 December](#)
3. [“Lebanon: Sharp increase of deaths in custody must be a wake-up call for authorities”, 7 June](#)
4. [“Lebanon: Unacceptable lack of justice, truth and reparation three years after Beirut blast”, 3 August](#)
5. [“Lebanon: Killers of activist Lokman Slim must be brought to justice”, 3 February](#)
6. [“Lebanon: Attack on freedoms targets LGBTI people repressive legislation; unlawful crackdown”, 5 September](#)