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HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: REVIEW OF 2019; LEBANON

In response to nationwide protests and strikes that broke out shortly after the government announced new tax measures, the security forces used excessive force to disperse protesters, and failed to protect people's right to protest peacefully. Security forces continued to use torture and other ill-treatment; dozens reported being subjected to such treatment. Lebanon hosted 1.5 million Syrian refugees, but deported around 2,500 in violation of its *non-refoulement* obligations. It imposed barriers that hindered Syrian refugees accessing services and aid, leading to many living in dire conditions. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people and organizations continued to be denied their rights. Security forces interrogated peaceful activists, journalists and others for social media posts criticizing political or religious authorities. Women migrant workers continued to suffer discriminatory practices under the *kafala* (sponsorship) system. Death sentences were passed; no executions were carried out.

BACKGROUND

A new government was formed in January after nine months of political deadlock. Four of the 30 ministers were women, the highest proportion to date.

In September, the Prime Minister declared an economic emergency. Government announcements about austerity measures led to protests. On 17 October, in response to the government's new tax plans, nationwide protests and strikes erupted. On 29 October, the government resigned. At the end of the year, the crisis in providing essential services, including waste, electricity and water, persisted.

On 19 December, the President appointed Hassan Diab to serve as prime minister. He was not able to form a government before the year's end.

EXCESSIVE USE OF FORCE

In October, the army used excessive force to disperse protesters in the northern towns of Beddawi and Abdeh and the southern city of Saida, including by firing live ammunition, rubber bullets and tear gas bombs, and by beating protesters with rifle butts. On 26 October, soldiers shot and seriously injured at least two protesters in Beddawi.^[1]

On 17-18 October, riot police used excessive force to disperse an overwhelmingly peaceful protest in downtown Beirut, the capital; they fired large amounts of tear gas into crowds, chased protesters at gunpoint and beat them.^[2]

On several occasions in October and November, the security forces failed to intervene effectively to protect demonstrators in Beirut and the cities of Baalbek, Nabatiyeh and Sour from violent attacks by supporters of political parties.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Torture and other ill-treatment continued to be perpetrated by all the security apparatuses.^[3] Dozens of former detainees told Amnesty International and other human rights organizations that, among other torture methods, they were beaten with hoses, metal chains and other implements; given electric shocks on their genitals; and hung in stress positions for long periods.

In May, Hassan al-Dika died in custody allegedly following torture in detention. His father submitted three complaints, but judicial authorities failed to investigate. The Ministry of Interior opened an internal investigation; it concluded that Hassan al-Dika had died of an illness he had prior to his detention.

In March, the government appointed the five members of the National Preventative Mechanism, an independent body within the National Human Rights Institute mandated to investigate torture allegations and monitor detention conditions. However, it failed both to issue the decrees necessary to operationalize the mechanism and to allocate a budget to it.

REFUGEES AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS

Lebanon continued to host 1.5 million Syrian refugees, including 919,578 people registered with UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and, according to the government, around 550,000 who were unregistered. A 2015 government decision continued to bar UNHCR from registering newly arrived refugees from Syria. As of 31 July, there were 31,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

In April, the Higher Defence Council, an inter-ministerial body headed by the President, announced that refugees who entered Lebanon “illegally” after 24 April would be deported, in violation of Lebanon’s *non-refoulement* obligations. Between May and August, 2,447 Syrian refugees were deported to Syria.

In September, President Aoun told the UN General Assembly that a total of over 250,000 Syrian refugees had returned from Lebanon to Syria, either spontaneously or in organized groups.^[4] The authorities had been returning Syrian refugees since July 2018 under an agreement with the Syrian government. The Lebanese authorities presented these as “voluntary” returns, but their policies towards Syrian refugees raised questions about whether in some cases they amounted to “constructive” *refoulement*, prohibited in international law.

The authorities imposed barriers that hindered Syrian refugees accessing services and aid, leading to many living in dire conditions. UNHCR said that about 73% of refugees did not have legal residency and, in June, revealed that the authorities had tightened restrictions on Syrian refugee children under 15 seeking regular residency status. In April, the Higher Defence Council had announced it would start demolishing “semi-permanent structures” built by Syrian refugees in informal camps after 10 June, and implemented its decision shortly afterwards in several places.

Lebanon also continued to host tens of thousands of long-term Palestinian refugees, who remained subject to discriminatory laws excluding them from owning or inheriting property, accessing public education and health services, and working in at least 36 professions. At least 3,000 Palestinian refugees who do not hold official identity documents faced further restrictions, denying them the right to register births, marriages and deaths.

WOMEN’S RIGHTS

In June, parliament passed a law exempting children of Lebanese mothers married to non-Lebanese fathers, who hold residency cards but not Lebanese nationality, from the need to apply for work permits. However, the President returned the law to parliament for further review.

In September, the parliament’s Committee on Women and Children approved a draft law on sexual harassment in the workplace, but its general assembly failed to discuss it.

Lebanese legislation continued to discriminate against women.

RIGHTS OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND INTERSEX (LGBTI) PEOPLE

LGBTI organizations and individuals continued to be denied the freedom to exercise their rights. Article 534 of the Penal Code, which criminalizes “sexual intercourse which contradicts the laws of nature”, alongside other laws that criminalize sex work, drug use and trafficking, were used to prosecute LGBTI people.

In May, the Ministry of Telecommunications blocked access to the Grindr app, which is mainly used by gay and trans men.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Security forces continued to arrest and interrogate human rights and peaceful political activists, journalists and other individuals for social media posts criticizing political or religious authorities. The Muhal Observatory for Freedom of Expression said 78 people were summoned for interrogation in 2019 simply for expressing their views online.

In July, church leaders called on the organizers of a festival to cancel the appearance of the band Mashrou' Leila, saying its songs were “offensive to religious and humanitarian values and Christian beliefs”. The statement triggered a social media storm accusing the band of propagating sexual perversion and a protest threatened violence against the band and its fans. The Ministry of Interior failed to announce that it would protect the band and its fans, while the judiciary failed to investigate those who incited violence. The festival’s organizers cancelled the band’s appearance, stating they were forced to do so “to prevent bloodshed and maintain security and stability”.

MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS

Women migrant workers continued to suffer discriminatory practices under the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, which restricted their rights to freedom of movement and communication, education and health, including sexual and reproductive health. Amnesty International documented serious human rights abuses faced by many of the country’s 250,000 migrant domestic workers, mostly women, at the hands of their employers. Exploitative working conditions included long working hours, deprivation of rest days, denial of pay or imposed deductions, deprivation of food and proper accommodation, verbal and physical abuse, and denial of access to health care.^[5]

In April, the Minister of Labour formed a working group to look into dismantling the *kafala* system. The working group submitted a plan in May, but none of its recommendations had been implemented by the end of 2019.

INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE

In September, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon confirmed an indictment against Salim Jamil Ayyash on charges relating to attacks on politicians Marwan Hamade, Georges Hawi and Elias El-Murr in 2004 and 2005. The judge issued both an [arrest warrant](#) for execution by the Lebanese authorities and an [international arrest warrant](#).

DEATH PENALTY

Courts continued to hand down death sentences; no executions were carried out.

[1] Amnesty International, *Lebanon: Investigate excessive use of force including use of live ammunition to disperse protests* (Press release, 1 November 2019). <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/11/lebanon-investigate-excessive-use-of-force-including-use-of-live-ammunition-to-disperse-protests/>

[2] Amnesty International, *Lebanon: Authorities must immediately end the use of excessive force against peaceful protesters* (Press release, 19 October 2019). <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/lebanon-authorities-must-immediately-end-the-use-of-excessive-force-against-peaceful-protesters/>

[3] Amnesty International, *Lebanon is failing torture survivors by delaying implementation of crucial reforms* (Press release, 26 June 2019). <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/06/lebanon-is-failing-torture-survivors-by-delaying-implementation-of-crucial-reforms/>

[4] Amnesty International, *Lebanon: Why are returns of refugees from Lebanon to Syria premature?* (Index: MDE 18/0481/2019). <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde18/0481/2019/en/>

[5] Amnesty International, *'Their home is my prison': Exploitation of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon* (Index: MDE 18/0022/2019). <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde18/0022/2019/en/>

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