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Lebanon: Harrowing Prison Conditions

(Beirut) – Prison conditions in [Lebanon](#) have dangerously deteriorated amid the country's [economic crisis](#), Human Rights Watch said today. Overcrowding has become the norm, health care is subpar, and the government's failure to pay outstanding bills has endangered the food supply for the country's prisons.

Nearly 80 percent of Lebanon's prison population is in pretrial detention, according to the caretaker [Ministry of Interior](#). Roumieh prison near Beirut, Lebanon's largest prison, was meant to hold 1,200 prisoners, but currently holds about 4,000, [according](#) to the head of the Beirut Bar Association. Detention centers across Lebanon have a total capacity of 4,760, but currently hold about 8,502 people, only 1,094 of whom have been sentenced, according to Lebanon's Internal Security Forces (ISF), which oversees prison operations.

"With four of every five people in prison still waiting for a judge to rule on their cases, it is no wonder that Roumieh prison is bursting at the seams," said [Ramzi Kaiss](#), Lebanon researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The ongoing economic crisis is no excuse for subjecting people in the government's care to dire conditions."

Human Rights Watch spoke to four families of prisoners and a member of the Committee of the Families of Prisoners in Lebanon, who detailed the substandard conditions at Roumieh Prison. Human Rights Watch also spoke to Mohammed Sablouh, a lawyer and head of the Prison's Committee at the Tripoli Bar Association, a mental health counsellor who worked in Roumieh prison between 2011 and 2018, and two workers with international groups involved in Lebanon prison rehabilitation projects.

In April 2023, Human Rights Watch sent a letter with research findings to the head of Lebanon's General Directorate of Internal Security Forces,

Major General Imad Othman. The ISF responded on July 25.

The ISF said in its response that “most prisons across Lebanon’s governorates, including the prisons in Zahleh and Tripoli, and women’s prisons in Baabda and Barbar Khazen, in addition to others, are overcrowded at levels that exceed these prisons’ capacities.” It said that the reasons include an increase in crime rates, slow trial proceedings that have delayed release, and the inability of many prisoners who have served their sentences to pay fees required for their release.

The level of overcrowding in Lebanon’s prisons is alarming and “has resulted in worsening humanitarian and livelihood conditions and a drop in the level of health, food and security, which was further exacerbated as a result of the financial and economic crisis that Lebanon has been suffering since 2019,” the ISF said.

The detainees’ family members said that access to food in prisons has dangerously deteriorated since the beginning of the economic crisis in 2019.

Before the economic crisis, most prisoners did not rely on food provided by prisons, opting instead for food brought in by their families or purchased at the prison canteen at higher-than-market prices, Sabloun said. But inmates became more reliant on prison food after the authorities suspended family visits during the Covid-19 pandemic. Although family visits have resumed, rising inflation and sky-rocketing food and [fuel prices](#) have created insurmountable barriers for many families who would otherwise support their detained relatives.

At the same time, as the demand for food provided by prisons has increased, rising food prices and the devaluation of the Lebanese currency relative to the US dollar has made it difficult to pay contract food suppliers, the ISF told Human Rights Watch. The ISF, working with the Finance and Interior Ministries, has responded with [patchwork solutions](#) that have ensured monthly food payments until the end of the year.

But the families said that, even with food deliveries ensured, the food remains insufficient and of such poor quality that it is often unfit for consumption.

“It’s food even dogs wouldn’t eat,” a mother of a prisoner at Roumieh prison said. Another prisoner’s mother said that “in the past, they would bring four large pots [of Burghul, a cracked wheat foodstuff] for 500 prisoners. Now they bring only one pot.” All families of prisoners interviewed said that the quantity and quality of food has significantly decreased in the past three years. At the same time, the prison canteen continues to charge exorbitant prices for food, sometimes twice or three

times their market value, rates that many families cannot afford, they said.

Despite millions of dollars allocated to improve prisons conditions in Lebanon, the treatment of prisoners and their detention conditions remain deplorable. Lebanon's authorities, including the Internal Security Forces and the Justice and Interior Ministries should urgently develop and carry out immediate and long-term plans to rectify the situation in prisons and guarantee people's rights

Ramzi Kaiss

Lebanon Researcher, Human Rights Watch

Lebanese authorities have also failed to carry out previously approved government plans to relieve overcrowding. In 2015, the Lebanese government agreed to [allocate](#) US\$30 million to build a new prison in the town of Mejdlaya, in northern Lebanon, with then Interior Minister Nohad Machnouk, [stating](#) that the construction project would be completed in 18 months. Eight years later, the prison has not been built.

People interviewed also expressed frustration that significant international efforts to improve prison conditions have not yielded significant improvements. Development projects intended to deliver medicine to the Roumieh prisoners, for example, have not improved prisoners' access to medication.

In November 2022, the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (Agenzia italiana per la cooperazione allo sviluppo, AICS) [donated](#) €100,000 (around US\$108,000) worth of medication to Roumieh prison, it told Human Rights Watch. Yet prisoners, their families, and Sabloun have said that the prison pharmacy still lacks basic medicines. One prisoner's wife expressed frustration that even after families bought medicines for their imprisoned family members, prisoners were still unable to get them.

According to [Amnesty International](#), the number of deaths in Lebanese detention facilities nearly doubled in 2022 compared with 2018, before the economic crisis began.

Under international norms, the [United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners](#) (also known as the Nelson Mandela Rules), "every prisoner shall be provided by the prison administration at the usual hours with food of nutritional value adequate for health and strength, of wholesome quality and well prepared and served." They further state that "drinking water shall be available to every prisoner whenever he or she needs it." Prisoners should also "have access to necessary health-care services free of charge without discrimination on the grounds of their legal status" and state authorities should "endeavor to reduce prison

overcrowding and, where appropriate, resort to non-custodial measures as alternatives to pretrial detention.”

Lebanese authorities should take urgent steps to relieve prison overcrowding, including by considering alternatives to detention for pretrial detainees, and provide prisoners with adequate and reliable access to food and medical care, Human Rights Watch said.

“Despite millions of dollars allocated to improve prisons conditions in Lebanon, the treatment of prisoners and their detention conditions remain deplorable” Kaiss said. “Lebanon’s authorities, including the Internal Security Forces and the Justice and Interior Ministries should urgently develop and carry out immediate and long-term plans to rectify the situation in prisons and guarantee people’s rights.”

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Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for
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(ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße
32, 1041 Wien
T +43 1 589 00 583
F +43 1 589 00 589
info@ecoi.net

Contact
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F.A.Q.
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