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State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2012 - Lebanon

Lebanon has enjoyed greater freedom of speech than many other Arab countries, and largely avoided the Arab uprisings. But the country continued to be gripped by political paralysis. The national unity government led by Saad Hariri collapsed in January 2011, because of disagreement over the Special Tribunal for Lebanon on the assassination of Rafik Hariri. Competing regional affiliations also played a big part in the government's demise. It took Hariri's successor, billionaire Najib Mikati who was named prime minister in January 2011, six months to form a government. Despite being a coalition of supposedly like-minded parties, including Hezbollah and the Christian Free Patriotic Movement, the new government has also struggled to reach consensus on many local and regional issues. The situation of minorities, both ethnic minority groups and those who do not have citizenship in Lebanon, remained relatively unchanged in Lebanon, except for the influx of Syrian refugees across the border, fleeing the violence there.

There are approximately 455,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon registered with UNRWA (comprising 10 per cent of the country's population), around half of whom live in 12 recognized refugee camps. Palestinian refugees are denied citizenship and so have few basic rights, or access to state services. Most Palestinian refugees can only find low-paid temporary employment and cannot work in over 30 professions, such as medicine, law and engineering; women are significantly more likely to be unemployed than men and some families rely on child labour for income. As UNRWA only provides them with basic health services, many cannot access long-term health care. They also face restrictions on their movement, requiring permits to leave their camps.

In February 2011, UK-based Palestinian NGOs the Palestinian Refugee Centre and the Council for European Palestinian Refugees reported on the desperate situation in the refugee camps that are prohibited from expanding and therefore suffering from increasingly overcrowded living space. Prime Minister Mikati promised to grant Palestinian refugees work permits and to grant civil and human rights, but ongoing Lebanese political dysfunction makes it virtually impossible to imagine this happening in the foreseeable future.

By the end of 2011, 4,840 Syrian refugees were registered with the UNHCR and the Lebanese High Relief Committee, the majority of whom had fled from Syria's Homs province. Many are residing with host families in north Lebanon, waiting for the situation at home to stabilize before they return. Their legal status is ambiguous, and they also face the threat of Syrian troop incursions and kidnappings by Syrian agents in Lebanon. Syrian refugees have complained that their movements are restricted by the Lebanese army, since they do not have exit stamps on their passports or identity cards, and that little has been done to ensure their security.

There are about 150,000 Arab Bedouin in Lebanon, who lived in what is now Lebanon before the country was created. Originally self-sufficient, years of urbanization and drought have impoverished them, weakening their customs and traditional pastoral livelihoods. Bedouin in Lebanon have fought for years to be recognized as Lebanese citizens. During Lebanon's only population census in 1932, many Bedouins who failed to register did not get citizenship and thus became stateless. Those without citizenship are given laissez-passer papers, which protect them from arrest and deportation, but does not grant them any civil rights. Because some of their settlements are not recognized, their access to water and electricity is also limited.

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