

Libanon (32)



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**U.S. Committee for Refugees World Refugee Survey
2002 – Lebanon**

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Lebanon hosted about 389,500 refugees and asylum seekers in need of protection in 2001. These included 382,973 Palestinian refugees registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), 2,815 other refugees recognized by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and 3,680 asylum seekers awaiting a UNHCR decision on their refugee claims.

In addition to UNRWA-registered refugees, another 42,000 unregistered Palestinians live in Lebanon. Because about 22,000 of these trace their exile to the 1967 war, they fall outside the UNRWA definition. Another 20,000 are considered to be of Lebanese origin, but identify themselves as Palestinians.

Conditions for Palestinians in Lebanon remained poor in 2001, as did their relations with their reluctant Lebanese hosts. Infighting between Palestinians aligned with Yassir Arafat's Fatah movement and other Palestinian factions, particularly in Sidon's Ain El-Hilweh refugee camp, also triggered sporadic violence during the year.

Lebanon made slow progress during 2001 in returning an estimated 250,000 to 300,000 long-term internally displaced people to their homes. Although significant numbers of internally displaced Lebanese originated from parts of southern Lebanon from which Israeli forces withdrew in May 2000, few had returned to reclaim their homes in the formerly occupied zone by the end of 2001.

Some 3,900 South Lebanese Army (SLA) militia men and their families who fled southern Lebanon following the Israeli army's withdrawal from the area in May 2000 remained in Israel at the end of 2001. Several hundred more were in other countries.

Palestinian Rights and Legal Status

The overwhelming majority of Lebanese citizens remained steadfastly opposed in 2001 to the permanent integration of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Lebanese frequently argue that naturalizing Palestinians, who amount to as much as 10 percent of Lebanon's total population and are mostly Sunni Muslim, would disrupt Lebanon's delicate political balance, which is based on power sharing along sectarian lines. Others blame Palestinians for their role in the protracted civil war of the 1970s and 1980s.

Lebanon's constitution explicitly forbids the permanent integration of Palestinians in the country. The rejection of permanent settlement has led Lebanon's government to oppose all policies and actions that could be construed as accepting or facilitating Palestinian integration.

Since the early 1990s, Lebanon has imposed a host of draconian restrictions on resident Palestinians to prevent their integration and to signal to the international community that it considers Palestinian refugees to be an international, not a Lebanese, problem. While Lebanese



UNRWA operates five secondary schools in Lebanon because Palestinian students are not eligible to enroll in Lebanese government secondary schools and generally cannot afford Lebanese private schools. UNRWA also provided vocational and technical training to some 650 students in 2001 and granted 50 university scholarships, down from 84 the previous year.

The high number of refugees enrolled in UNRWA's special hardship program in Lebanon also served as a barometer for the poor socio-economic conditions in which Palestinian refugees lived during 2001. UNRWA registered 11 percent of all Palestinian refugees in Lebanon as "special hardship cases" during the year, the highest in all of UNRWA's fields of operation. During 2001, UNRWA reported an increase in the number of special hardship cases as greater numbers of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon were unable to meet their most basic needs for food and shelter.

UNRWA provided cash, food, and housing assistance to special hardship cases. Although UNRWA provided funding to rebuild 123 houses belonging to families registered with the special hardship program, the agency lacked the funding to rebuild 1,571 other refugee houses identified as substandard. Lebanese government building restrictions reportedly hampered UNRWA efforts to rebuild refugee housing in some refugee camps in southern Lebanon.

Non-Palestinian Refugees

UNHCR reported 2,815 non-Palestinian refugees in Lebanon in 2001, mostly from Iraq (1,828) and Sudan (521). Some 2,312 asylum seekers filed applications with UNHCR during the year, the majority from Iraq (1,497).

Already precarious, the situation of non-Palestinian asylum seekers and refugees deteriorated during the year. The arrest, detention, and deportation of undocumented foreigners, including asylum seekers and refugees, increased during 2001. However, Lebanon claimed that it was merely enforcing its laws to prevent foreigners from entering illegally, which is how the overwhelming majority of asylum seekers arrived in the country.

Although other deportations were reported during 2001, the largest took place on December 22, when Lebanon deported between 180 and 300 Iraqi nationals to Syria, including UNHCR-registered refugees and asylum seekers. Syria, in turn, deported them to northern Iraq. An unconfirmed report alleged that the de facto Kurdish authorities in northern Iraq deported at least one Iraqi family of Arab ethnicity to government-controlled Iraq, where the family was arrested by the Iraqi police. The deportees reportedly included some refugees approved for resettlement to third countries, including the United States.

USCR condemned the deportations in a December 28 letter to the Lebanese government, saying that Lebanon's actions breached the *non-refoulement* provision of the UN Refugee Convention, which Lebanon, although not a signatory to the Convention, was bound to honor by customary international law. USCR also pointed out that Lebanon's arrest and detention of the deportees prior to their removal violated Article 31 of the UN Refugee Convention (which holds that states should not penalize asylum seekers for illegal entry provided they show good cause for their illegal entry).

The *Surete Generale*, responsible for border control, reportedly detained hundreds of foreigners pending deportation – mostly Iraqis, Sudanese, Egyptians, and Sri Lankans – in poor conditions. There were credible allegations that Lebanese authorities mistreated detainees.

Because of Lebanon's restrictive approach toward non-Palestinian asylum seekers and refugees, resettlement was the only durable solution for UNHCR-recognized refugees in Lebanon in 2001. While UNHCR assisted 904 refugees in resettling to third countries during the year – including 653 Iraqis, 132 Sudanese, and 66 Afghans, and 53 refugees of other nationalities – it appeared that the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States would result in a substantial drop in future resettlement opportunities for refugees in Lebanon. At year's end, the United States – which resettled the majority of UNHCR-recognized refugees in Lebanon prior to September 11 – appeared to indicate that it would not return to Lebanon to adjudicate refugee claims for resettlement in 2002.

Southern Lebanon

In May 2000, Israel withdrew from its so-called "security zone" in southern Lebanon, ending its 22-year occupation. As Israel pulled its forces back into northern Israel, its surrogate, the South Lebanese Army (SLA), disintegrated, and about 6,000 of its members and their families fled to Israel, fearing retribution from Hizballah guerrillas and Lebanese forces for collaborating with Israel.

Several hundred SLA militia men and accompanying family members reportedly returned to Lebanon in 2001, in addition to the 1,600 who repatriated in 2000. Lebanese authorities arrested, tried, and convicted most for treason upon their return, handing down sentences ranging from one week to life imprisonment.

Although tens of thousands of Lebanese displaced from their homes in the Israeli occupied zone during the past quarter-century poured into southern Lebanon to visit their former villages and homes in the wake of Israel's troop withdrawal in May 2000, the Lebanese government reported to USCR that few have returned permanently since. The economic and physical devastation of the formerly occupied south, coupled with the fact that many displaced from the south had long since started lives elsewhere in the country (many in Beirut), appeared to explain the low level of return.

Long-term Internal Displacement

Lebanon's civil war caused the violent fragmentation of a pluralistic society into fairly distinct sectarian areas. At the height of the conflict, up to a million people were internally displaced for long periods of time, and many people were often displaced briefly during the course of the fighting. When the civil war ended in 1991, some 90,000 families, or about 450,000 persons, remained displaced. Some 86 percent of the displaced originated from the Mount Lebanon governorate (62 percent) and southern Lebanon (24 percent). Significant numbers of the displaced, particularly from the south, settled in Beirut.

Although reliable figures remained scarce, some observers estimated that about 20 percent (90,000 people) of the 450,000 still displaced in 1991 had returned to their former homes between 1991 and 2001. Although it was not known how many internally displaced persons were actively seeking to return to their homes, USCR believed that between 250,000 and 300,000 Lebanese remained internally displaced in 2001.

The pace of return appeared to remain slow in 2001. Although the Lebanese government reportedly spent \$208 million on programs for the

internally displaced between July 1999 and October 2001, the destruction of infrastructure, shortage of schools, and lack of economic opportunities prevented returns to many villages of origin. In some cases, political obstacles and security fears also prevented the return of internally displaced persons.

In the past, the UN Development Program (UNDP) has questioned the central assumption underlying the Lebanese government's approach to long-term internal displacement: that the solution to the problem lies in reversing the process and returning the displaced to their former homes. UNDP said that the goal of returning the displaced disregards the many social and economic changes that Lebanon has undergone during the past 20 years, and argues that these changes, many the result of rural-to-urban migration, would have taken place even in the absence of war.

