



“The Humanitarian Crisis in Syria: Views from the Ground”

**Testimony by
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Chairwoman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutsch, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the important topic of the Syrian refugee crisis.

I am the Director of Humanitarian Assistance for Global Communities. Global Communities is working in Lebanon in partnership with UNHCR to implement shelter and infrastructure assistance programs, such as repairing homes and schools for Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities in Beirut and Mt. Lebanon, a district located approximately 30 minutes from downtown Beirut. Our organization has been working in Lebanon since 1997 and we have worked through many conflicts and disaster situations, including the 2006 war. This crisis, however, is of a new scale altogether¹.

The number of Syrian refugees today exceeds 2.7 million and continues to grow rapidly. Women and children make up 75% of the refugees. In April 2014, the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon alone exceeded one million, nearly 40% of the total refugee population. Among this million in Lebanon are more than 300,000 unschooled children working or begging in the streets, vulnerable to labor and sexual exploitation.

To give you some sense of scale of the crisis, the one million Syrian refugees in Lebanon constitute at least 20% of the total population of the country. This is as though the entire population of Canada was uprooted and moved into the USA – twice over. But in area, Lebanon is only one-third of the size of the state of Maryland. Without understanding this sense of scale it is hard to comprehend the density of population, the stress on resources and the escalating tensions and hostilities between Syrian refugees and their Lebanese hosts. The country is like a pressure cooker ready to explode. There is no other country in the world today that hosts such a high proportion of refugees compared to its own citizens, and that number will only increase as the war continues to rage across the border in Syria.

¹ “Syrian Refugee Crisis: Rapid Needs Assessment in Lebanon” Global Communities, May 14, 2014
<http://www.globalcommunities.org/node/37816>

The Lebanese government should be commended for continuing to keep its borders open. To date, Lebanon has been welcoming and supportive to Syrians throughout the conflict, but that welcome is wearing thin. The sense of fatigue in supporting the crisis is everywhere—from the refugees themselves to the Lebanese community members and the aid actors attempting to provide support. Today Lebanon is facing a breaking point in its capacity to absorb any more refugees.

My remarks today will address the situation in Lebanon specifically, along two main points.

1 – Syrian refugees and Lebanese citizens are competing against each other for the same water, energy and economic resources. We must increasingly focus our support on medium-to-long term solutions for host communities and Syrian refugees, as these shared services have reached a breaking point.

2 – The failure to support refugees and host communities will likely create a destabilizing effect in Lebanon that will reverberate throughout the region.

1 – Syrian refugees and Lebanese citizens are competing against each other for the same water, energy and economic resources. We must increasingly focus our support on medium-to-long term solutions for host communities and Syrian refugees, as these shared services have reached a breaking point.

Pre-dating the Syrian war, Lebanese communities across the country were already poor and vulnerable with 23% living below the poverty line of \$4 a day. Most refugees are living in 242 locations in Lebanon which were classified as the most vulnerable and poor in the country, even before the presence of the refugees. The influx of refugees has only worsened the situation and strained shared public services to the breaking point. However, the bulk of assistance has gone to refugees, leaving Lebanese communities worse off than ever. The World Bank estimates an additional 170,000 Lebanese have been pushed into poverty since the start of the Syrian crisis and that by the end of 2014, 3.15 million of Lebanon's 4.1 million citizens will be in need of some form of financial, shelter or food support.² For example:

- Prices of basic commodities, food, and transportation have increased with growing demand, while intense labor competition has driven wages downwards. Rental prices for even the most basic shelters in many areas have increased two to three-fold as Lebanese landlords have been taking advantage of the demand-driven market.
- Access to reliable water sources is a critical issue. Problems with water quality, supply and inadequate sanitation services that pre-date the Syrian crisis continue to deteriorate in Lebanon³. Additionally, reports indicate a decrease in 54% from the general average in rainfall over the past 30 years, drastically exacerbating the supply problem.

UNHCR defines a protracted refugee situation as at least 25,000 refugees seeking asylum in a country for at least five years. Resolving protracted situations requires at least one of the three durable solutions for refugees: voluntary return to their home countries in safety and dignity; local

²<http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2013/09/24/lebanon-bears-the-brunt-of-the-economic-and-social-spillovers-of-the-syrian-conflict>

³National Water Sector Strategy, Ministry of Energy and Water, March 2012.

integration in their country of asylum; or third-country resettlement⁴. With the Syrian refugee crisis accelerating and with no end in sight of the war that precipitates it, we must consider the situation in Lebanon to be a long-term, protracted situation. We must position the aid that is being supplied so that we are considering durable, long-term solutions for the needs of refugees and their Lebanese hosts. This goes beyond shelter, food, medicine and essential items into providing assistance to host communities to reduce the strain on Lebanon's shared housing, energy, education and water sources.

2- The failure to support refugees and host communities will create a destabilizing effect in Lebanon and reverberate throughout the region

Global Communities believes that we should support refugees and host communities according to the humanitarian imperative that action should always be taken to prevent or alleviate human suffering arising out of disaster or conflict. These people are fleeing terrible violence and are living in hazardous conditions with little security in countries that may or may not welcome their presence. There are also practical reasons for continuing this support:

- More than 300,000 unschooled Syrian refugee children, including 2,440 refugee children with parental support or supervision⁵, are vulnerable to labor and sexual exploitation, and they are also vulnerable to recruitment by radical groups. The growing number of disenfranchised youth in host communities are also vulnerable to radical ideology and recruitment into extremist groups.
- Where there is a failure to aid the Lebanese government in the provision of refugee and host community assistance, extremist factions have stepped into the gap and exploited vulnerable populations. A generation of disenfranchised young people can lead to terrible long-term consequences.
- Our experience on the ground is that Lebanese community members report both verbal and physical altercations between residents as well as an uptick in disputes, discrimination and harassment. Lebanese often express concern with the increasing number of Syrians and associate them with anti-social behavior including delinquent youth, harassment and violence against women. Law enforcement officials believe an increase in the crime rate is linked with the growth of the Syrian population. Whether these claims are rumor or fact is often difficult to determine, but the perception is damaging enough to relations between Lebanese communities and reflects the growing tensions.

The harsh reality is that the Syrians will be in Lebanon for the medium term, at the very least. Aid needs to be focused on easing the divide between communities, identifying common interests and creating shared benefits. Failure to do so will allow simmering tensions to reach unsustainable levels that could easily destabilize a country already deeply vulnerable to conflict with a tenuous political and fragile sectarian balance. There is a tremendous danger of the Syrian conflict erupting in Lebanon and then spiraling outwards into a regional conflict, engulfing U.S. allies such as Israel and Jordan. This is a grave situation to be avoided at all costs.

⁴ US Department of State. <http://www.state.gov/j/prm/policyissues/issues/protracted/#1>

⁵ UNHCR. The Future of Syria. Refugee Children in Crisis. <http://unhcr.org/FutureOfSyria/executive-summary.html#syrian-refugee-children>

Future Steps in Resolving the Humanitarian Crisis

In December 2013, UNHCR released the sixth iteration of the Syria Regional Response Plan, a united effort on behalf of international aid providers in the region to present a consolidated number of projected funding needs for 2014. The Plan appealed for \$4.2 billion to cover the needs of the 4.1 million refugees expected to flee Syria and 2.7 million people in host communities by the end of December 2014⁶. It is the largest donor pledge in history and will likely remain underfunded due to limited funds allocated for humanitarian assistance and the growing sense of donor fatigue.

At the Humanitarian Pledging Conference for Syria in Kuwait on January 15, 2014, Secretary of State John Kerry announced that the US would contribute an additional \$380 million to Syrian humanitarian efforts—bringing the total US humanitarian commitment to more than \$1.7 billion, the largest of any nation⁷. Nevertheless, the appeal is only 25% funded.⁸

Unfilled, there is not enough assistance for refugees and host communities.

- We recommend that the U.S. Government continue to support the needs of the victims of this conflict for both emergency aid and development of Lebanese communities in response to the protracted nature of this conflict. We strongly encourage the U.S. Government and other governments to live up to their pledges to ensure that the response to the crisis is fully funded. Refugees and host communities must both be supported, for both humanitarian and security reasons linked to the potential broader destabilization of the region.
- We recommend that the United States Congress in particular provide robust funding for the humanitarian assistance accounts of the FY15 federal budget. The humanitarian community was concerned to see a 25% cut to these accounts in the President's request. In order for us to be able to respond to this and other crises around the world, we request the following amounts:
 - International Disaster Assistance - \$2.1 billion
 - Migration and Refugee Assistance - \$3.1 billion
 - Food for Peace - \$1.866 billion

We commend the U.S. Government for its moral leadership and financial commitment to protecting the vulnerable communities around the Syrian conflict. We ask that you continue to provide this support and to be an example to the wider world.

⁶<http://www.unhcr.org/syriarrp6/>

⁷<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/01/220029.htm>

⁸<http://www.unocha.org/crisis/syria>