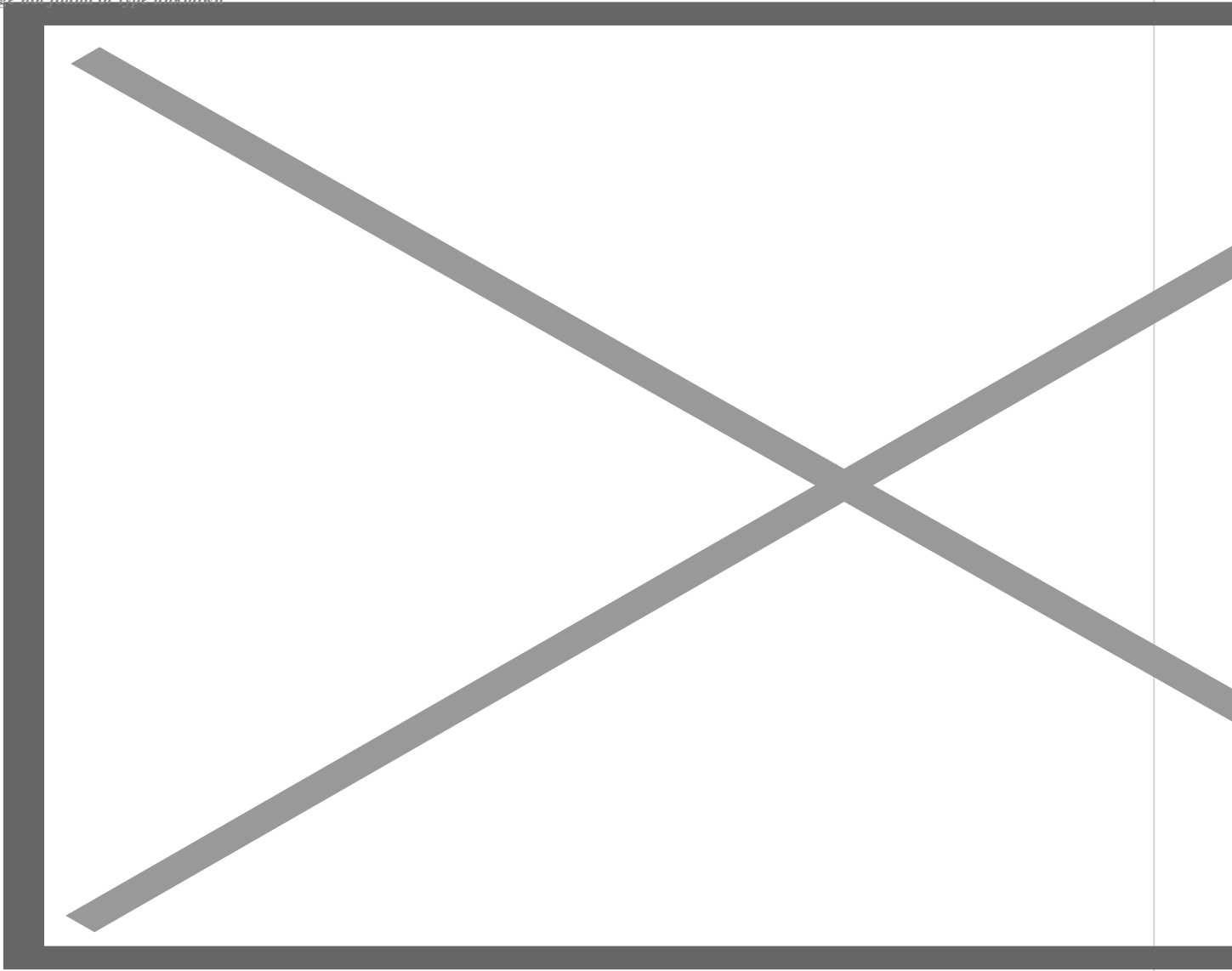


Lebanon faces tough Ramadan amid 'insane' food prices

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Food prices across Lebanon are soaring as the country goes through its worst economic crisis in decades.

Beirut, April 18 (RHC)-- Many Muslim families in Lebanon are struggling to afford iftar, the evening meal which breaks the daily fast during the holy month of Ramadan, as food prices soar amid the country's worst economic crisis in decades.

"Prices are insane and they have gone up even more during Ramadan ... a plate of salad will cost six times more this year," Beirut resident Um Ahmed told Al Jazeera.

Al Jazeera's Zeina Khodr, reporting from Beirut, said that "for millions of people in Lebanon, food is becoming a luxury." She said that while Ramadan is an important event for Muslims, there were "few signs" marking the occasion in many Beirut neighbourhoods. "Gone are the lights, decorations and the vending stalls with traditional drinks that are staples on an iftar table."

Lebanon's economy and currency have been in free-fall, reducing people's purchasing power. The Lebanese pound dropped to 10,000 against the US dollar in early March, and later in the month, it fell to an unprecedented 15,000. The currency has lost about 90 percent of its value since late 2019.

"Those who used to buy a kilo of vegetables are now buying half, while others buy by piece ... some just walk away after knowing the prices," Ahmed, a vegetable seller, said. A month of iftar meals for a family of five is now estimated to cost two and a half times the minimum wage which is worth \$60 at the black market rate.

Lebanon imports most of its food and there have been shortages as the government is running out of dollars. "Our salary hasn't changed but the prices have soared," resident Hana Sader said. Despite wheat being subsidised by the government, the price of bread has also increased. Buying a single pack of bread a day over a month costs more than 10 percent of the minimum wage.

Charities have had to expand their efforts to help those in need, as unemployment in the nation of five million people rises. Maya Terro is the co-founder of FoodBlessed, an organisation that feeds some 1,600 families a month.

"They say if they don't receive the food box this month it might mean we might not have iftar or we have to eat half the amount," she told Al Jazeera. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated socioeconomic inequality, with more than half of Lebanese families living in poverty.

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Last month, protests swept across Lebanese towns and cities, with demonstrators setting up roadblocks on major highways. Moreover, a political deadlock is adding to Lebanon's woes as Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri and President Michel Aoun continue to be at odds over the formation of a new government and how ministries will be allocated.

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