

UNRWA in race against time for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon

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UNRWA officials addressing reporters in Lebanon's capital, Beirut. [Zeina Khodr/Al Jazeera]

Beirut, January 19 (RHC)-- The cash-strapped United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees has warned it is facing a "race against time" as it appealed for emergency funding in order to provide vital services for some 210,000 vulnerable people in crisis-hit Lebanon.

"The situation is extremely serious and the crisis will continue," Claudio Cordone, director of the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) Affairs in Lebanon, told reporters in Beirut on Wednesday.

The news conference came a day after UNRWA announced a \$1.6bn appeal to avoid cuts in services for some 5.7 million Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, as well as in the occupied West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza. The agency runs schools, clinics and food distribution, among other programs. In Lebanon, UNRWA also administers refugee camps that now resemble low-quality urban dwellings, and is responsible for the infrastructure.

Speaking to Al Jazeera, Cordone said nearly \$200 million of the appeal would be allocated to supporting Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Cordone said the funds were needed to help refugee camps to cope with water and electricity shortages and skyrocketing fuel costs, as well as to hire sanitation, medical and social workers, and to provide cash assistance and other protection services.

“It’s a race against time to help the most vulnerable survive Lebanon’s unprecedented crisis,” UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Lebanon Najat Rochdi said. Rochdi sounded the alarm on child labour, child marriage and psychological distress among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, a country hit by one of worst economic crises in more than a century, according to the World Bank.

UN officials said that since last summer, almost 60 percent of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have eaten fewer meals to cope with high medical and food prices. Some 1,200 students have dropped out of school.

In November 2021, UNRWA head Philippe Lazzarini warned of an “existential” crisis, telling reporters in Jordan that the agency had only raised 48 percent of the funds needed for their 2022 and 2023 budgets.

Outside of UNRWA’s Lebanon headquarters in southern Beirut, a dozen Palestinian refugees who fled war-torn Syria to Lebanon have set up a tent to protest against budget cuts. “We can’t afford rent any more,” Mahmoud Saaed, who fled Aleppo in 2013, told Al Jazeera. “The cuts on rent assistance means that my family will soon be homeless.”

Lebanon’s economic crisis has plunged millions of people into poverty. The Lebanese pound has lost more than 90 percent of its value, while a fuel crisis has paralysed much of public life, with families having to spend extra money on private electricity suppliers and water trucks to cope with constant power cuts and water shortages.

Palestinians in Lebanon already cope with rampant unemployment and poverty, with both the UNRWA budget cuts and the existing economic crisis pushing families to the brink.

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