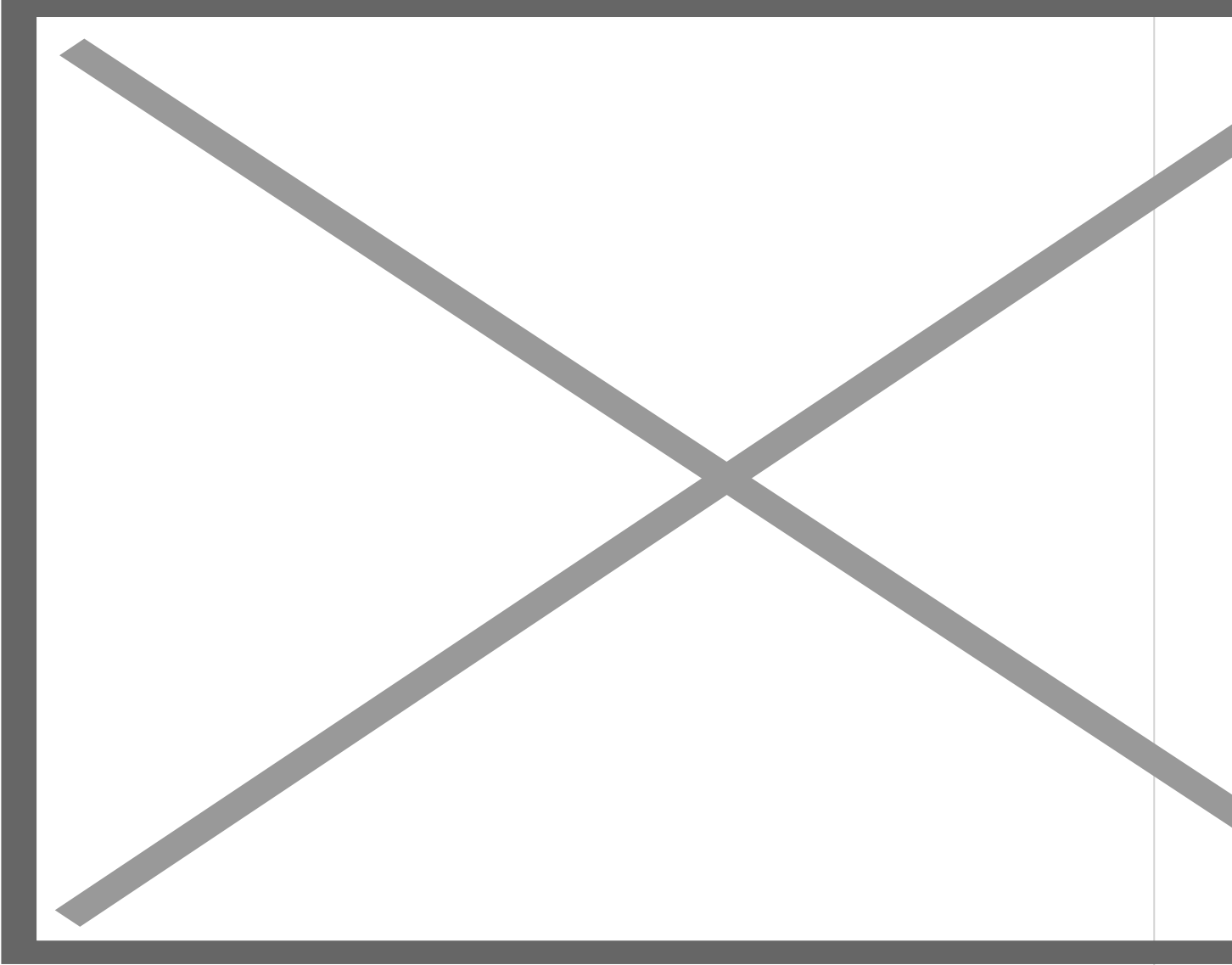


UNICEF says millions of Lebanese risk losing access to safe water

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Motorbike drivers wait to get fuel at a gas station in the suburbs of Beirut, Lebanon amid a fuel shortage [File: Aziz Taher/Reuters]

Beirut, July 24 (RHC)-- The United Nations has warned that more than four million people in Lebanon, including one million refugees, risk losing access to safe water as shortages of funding, fuel and supplies affect water pumping.

“UNICEF estimates that most water pumping will gradually cease across the country in the next four to six weeks,” a statement by the UN body said on Friday.

Lebanon is battling an economic meltdown that has propelled more than half of its population into poverty and seen its currency lose more than 90 percent of its value in less than two years.

The financial crisis has translated into severe shortages of basic goods such as fuel and medicine as dollars run dry. The UN agency said that maintenance costs incurred in U.S. dollars, funding shortages and the parallel collapse of the power grid were rapidly destroying the water sector.

UNICEF said that should the public water supply system collapse, water costs could jump by 200 percent a month as water would be secured from private water suppliers.

The UN agency said it needed \$40 million a year to secure the minimum levels of fuel, chlorine, spare parts and maintenance required to keep critical systems operational. “Unless urgent action is taken, hospitals, schools and essential public facilities will be unable to function,” UNICEF Representative in Lebanon, Yukie Mokuo, was quoted as saying in the statement.

The Lebanese pound, which for years was pegged to the US dollar, has lost more than 90 percent of its value over the past 18 months. Electricity in most places is barely available an hour a day while the fuel needed to power generators is also in short supply.

Basic medicines have been missing from pharmacy shelves for months and private hospitals warned on Thursday they were “hours away” from losing all power supply.

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