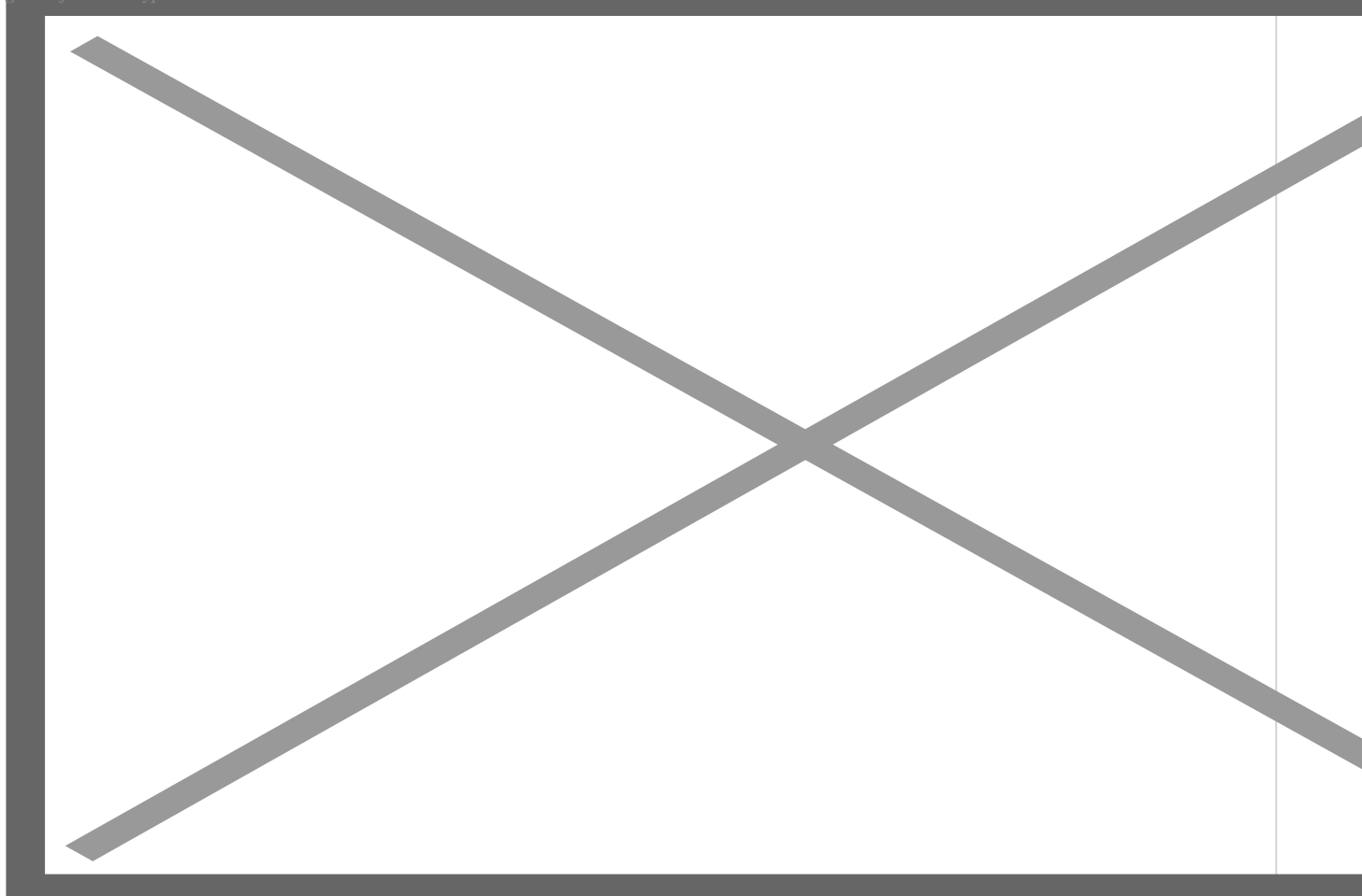


UNICEF warns severe water shortage to affect millions in Lebanon

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A Lebanese man drives as protesters block the roads with garbage bins and burning tires during protests after Lebanese Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri stepped down, abandoning his effort to form a new government, on July 15, 2021, in Beirut, Lebanon. (Photo by European Pressphoto Agency)

United Nations, August 23 (RHC)-- The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has warned that millions of people in Lebanon could face a critical shortage of water or be cut off completely in the coming days in the wake of a severe fuel crisis in the cash-strapped Arab nation.

"Vital facilities such as hospitals and health centers have been without access to safe water due to electricity shortages, putting lives at risk," UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore said in a statement.

"If four million people are forced to resort to unsafe and costly sources of water, public health and hygiene will be compromised, and Lebanon could see an increase in waterborne diseases, in addition to the surge in COVID-19 cases," she noted.

Last month, UNICEF warned that water supply systems were on the verge of collapse in Lebanon, and over 71 percent of the country's population was at the risk of losing access to water.

"The water sector is being squeezed to destruction by the current economic crisis in Lebanon, unable to function due to the dollarized maintenance costs, water loss caused by non-revenue water, the parallel collapse of the power grid and the threat of rising fuel costs," UNICEF Representative in Lebanon Yukie Mokuo said at the time.

"A loss of access to the public water supply could force households to make extremely difficult decisions regarding their basic water, sanitation and hygiene needs," she added.

The UN agency said the cost will be too much to bear for far too many of Lebanon's extremely vulnerable households as it represents 263 percent of the monthly average income. Lebanon has been mired since late 2019 in a deep economic and financial crisis, exacerbated by a political deadlock.

The economic and financial crisis is the gravest threat to the country's stability since the 15-year civil war ended in 1990. The crisis is mostly linked to the sanctions that the United States and its allies have imposed on Lebanon as well as foreign intervention in the Arab nation's domestic affairs.

According to Hicham Safieddine, a lecturer on the history of the modern Middle East at King's College London, US sanctions involving Lebanon "have seriously undermined the stability of the banking sector by creating a chilling effect, and reduced the inflow of foreign capital."

A senior UN official for Lebanon warns fuel shortage could put millions of lives at risk. Compounding the woes, Saudi Arabia has imposed its own sanctions, including banning its citizens from traveling to Lebanon where Riyadh-backed elements have been jockeying for position.

Last April, Saudi Arabia announced the suspension of fruit and vegetable imports from Lebanon, claiming shipments were being used for drug smuggling.

Nasser Qandil, editor-in-chief of Lebanon's al-Binaa newspaper, told Press TV at the time that the actual reason behind the prohibition was "political motivation," saying if Riyadh actually wanted to fight drug trafficking it could easily act through its ambassador in Beirut and contact the relevant Lebanese officials.

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