

Resolving the issue of war displacement in Lebanon

by Georges Assaf and Rana El-Fil

Internal and regional conflicts have led to massive and repeated waves of displacement in Lebanon.

At the height of the complex seventeen year-long war, up to one million people were internally displaced. Ten years after the Taif Agreement brought an end to conflict there are still some 450,000 IDPs¹, almost 14 per cent of the entire Lebanese population. The IDP question is one of the most pressing and contentious post-war issues and for many years it was highly politicized. Though huge funds have been allocated to resettling the displaced, remedies have generally been both ineffective and unjust.

Background

The first large-scale displacement began in 1975 and was characterized by confessional divisions. A quasi homogeneity of religious affiliation was violently imposed in different regions of the country and the capital was divided into Christian and Muslim sectors. In 1985 the largest and most destructive wave of forced internal migration (displacing an estimated 367,000 people) took place in Mount Lebanon. The displacement occurred in tragic conditions and struck a severe blow to the national unity of the country. Further massive displacement was caused by repeated Israeli invasions. The Israeli military operations in 1978 displaced more than 120,000 persons from the south to Beirut's suburbs where they often illegally occupied vacant houses, hotels and plots of land. The Israeli invasion of 1982 caused a temporary massive wave of displacement especially from the capital. While the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Beirut permitted a significant return movement, their withdrawal from Mount Lebanon was followed by severe internal clashes and further displacement.

During the years of conflict nothing could be done to put a halt to numerous instances of illegal occupation of property. The fragmentation and disintegration of the government and the power of the militias made it impossible to provide IDPs with shelter, security, food and medical care.

The disastrous effects of displacement have had ongoing social and psychological consequences. The fact that large numbers of families have had to live in one house has created tension and conflict. Overcrowding has increased the spread of disease. Drug abuse and delinquency have become prevalent among young people. As moral values have generally deteriorated squatting in somebody else's property has come to be regarded as normal. Indeed, some of the displaced even claim the right to squat as one of their legitimate rights. Illegal occupation of property has implicitly been condoned by political factions.

According to the Ministry for the Displaced there are still 70,735 displaced households. 62 per cent of IDP families are from the governorate of Mount Lebanon and 23.7 per cent from the South.²



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The Taif Agreement

The Document of National Understanding (known as the Taif Agreement after the Saudi city in which Lebanese parliamentarians met to agree it) was signed in 1989. It put an end to the fighting and declared the return of displaced persons a necessary condition for permanent reconciliation and sustainable peace: "The Lebanese territory is one and undivided land for all the Lebanese people. Every Lebanese citizen has the right to live anywhere on this territory under the sovereignty of law; there is no division, no separation and no settlement of people on the basis of their belonging."³

The document sought a just and enduring solution to the dilemma of the displaced. It required the government to "solve completely the problem of IDPs, and acknowledge the right of every Lebanese citizen displaced since 1975 to come back to the place from which he/she was displaced; to establish the legislation that safeguards this right and ensure the means of reconstruction."⁴

The Taif Agreement thus stressed not only the right of IDPs to return to their place of original residence but also pledged financial support to enable them to reconstruct their homes and villages. This has always been a major issue in all attempts to put an end to conflict in Lebanon. It was one of the main concerns at the Lausanne Conference in 1984. It was also an important feature of the abortive Tripartite Agreement between militias under the aegis of Syria, which provided for the return of IDPs within a period of "three months after the formation of a new Cabinet".⁵

The right of IDPs to return to their homes was formalized in 1990 through an amendment to the 1926 Constitution. The right of Lebanese citizens to unrestricted freedom of movement and residence in all parts of the country was enshrined in the constitution. An implicit corollary was rejection of any kind of partition of the territory of Lebanon.

Initial plan of return

Following ratification of the Taif Agreement, the Ministry for the Displaced was created to deal with the issue of war-displaced persons and a Central Fund for the Displaced founded to finance projects of return. A range of ministries agreed to contribute to the reconstruction of infrastructure in areas of return. While these initiatives seemed promising, the nomination of the former militia leader Walid Jumblatt as Minister for the Displaced was highly controversial. The same war leader who had played a role in the largest displacement (that from Mount Lebanon) was now given national responsibility for IDP return.

The government estimated that \$400m was needed to cover the return of all the

displaced in Lebanon. Figures indicate that although \$800m was spent from 1991 to 1999, only 20 per cent of the displaced were able to return to their villages.⁶ Only nine per cent of those who returned were fully reimbursed for expenditure on house reconstruction, the great majority of returnees having to pay for reconstruction from private funds. Overt and blatant mismanagement and embezzlement of funds led to tension between the former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, the parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri and the Minister for the Displaced.

Shortcomings of the initial plan

Implementation of the IDP return plan was characterized by deficiencies and inconsistency. There was a lack of coordination between the Ministry for the Displaced and the ministries in charge of

infrastructure and social services. Cash payments were made to rebuild and restore houses in regions where the infrastructure and social services

were inadequate or non-existent. Elsewhere in areas where such services existed, no restoration or reconstruction payments were available. Some returnees proceeded to rebuild properties without receiving payments while some who received reconstruction grants did not return and spent the money on other things.

The absence of planning and coordination for infrastructure projects was a major impediment to return. Some regions were provided with electricity but not with potable water. Many properties remained inaccessible as feeder roads were not rehabilitated. Insufficient attention was paid to building the socio-economic basis for sustainable return, providing social services and encouraging employment. The participation of NGOs was not encouraged despite their experience and wealth of human resources. Reconciliation and practical measures to restore civil peace and coexistence were not prioritized although of vital importance in those villages which had witnessed violent conflicts before and during the displacement.

The major obstacle to return of IDPs - the illegal occupation of their houses -

has primarily been resolved by paying squatters to leave. The level of payment has varied enormously from place to place and for properties of a similar nature. Total expenditure on evacuation has taken a disproportionate 61 per cent of all funds allocated for IDP return in the period 1993-1998.⁷

The complex issue of the return of IDPs to the South, and particularly to villages occupied by Israel, is on hold due to the absence of significant progress in the regional peace process.

A new approach

The presidential election in October 1998 and the formation of a new government pledged to put an end to corruption have offered new hope that serious efforts can be made to deal with the issue of the displaced.

Anwar Khalil, the Minister for the Displaced appointed in December 1998, has set a target for the return of all IDPs to their homes by 2001. The Lebanese Cabinet has approved his plan, and allocated \$750m to achieve this goal.⁸ The Ministry's initial plan was amended in November 1999 to allow payment to the children of IDPs to enable them to construct or purchase dwellings and to recompense IDPs who have repaired their properties at their own expense. The Ministry is continuing to work on the reconstruction of schools, health centres and places of worship. IDPs have been exempted from paying electricity and water bills while reconstructing their property and some zoning regulations have been waived.

Despite austerity measures resulting from a huge budget deficit, the new government has put the issue of return high on its list of priorities. Shadi Masaad, the new head of the Central Fund for the Displaced, has admitted that most past irregularities were the result of political interference: "direct orders from politicians or as a result of political accords".⁹ One of the most important aspects of the new approach is the depoliticization of the IDP issue. It is to be hoped that electoral and other political considerations will no longer be the main determining factors when funds are allocated to IDPs.

A large backlog of applications, for evacuation and for reconstruction, remain unprocessed. Statistics on the exact number of returnees are not available.

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Seventy thousand households are still awaiting reimbursement of money they have spent on reconstruction.

Only time will tell if the newly introduced measures are to be effective. In order to be successful, the reintegration, rehabilitation and development programmes of the Ministry of the Displaced will have to be coordinated with other ministries concerned with infrastructure and social services. Programmes must be based on a comprehensive assessment of needs.

Conclusion

If the issue of conflict-induced displacement is to be resolved effectively, considerable efforts need to be made to develop a broader strategy promoting sustainable development in areas of return. A failure to do so would endanger not only the return process but also the precarious peace in a country whose political life continues to be permeated by confessional sensibilities.

IDPs will have their rights restored only when decisions are no longer made in response to blackmail by factions which threaten to prevent IDP return to areas under their control unless the State pays disproportional amounts to their supporters. The rights of all Lebanese, not just IDPs, will only be respected if there is an official enquiry into the widespread embezzlement of funds which took place over a period of six years.

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Further information may be found on the website of the Ministry of the Displaced: www.lebanon.com/lebanese-republic/displaced/return.htm

1 Khattar Chebli, Displaced Committee Rapporteur, Displacement Issue, unpublished report, February 1998.

2 *op cit*

3 Document of National Understanding, I-H. For a summary of the text of the Taif Agreement see <http://www.techfak.uni-kiel.de/~agh/taif.html>

4 *op cit* III-D

5 Joseph Maila, *Les Cahiers de l'Orient*, Paris 1992

6 *Daily Star*, 28 January 1999

7 Khattar Chebli, Displaced Committee Reporteur, unpublished report, March 1999.

8 *Daily Star*, 25 May 1999