

No freedom, no future: undocumented Palestinian refugees in Lebanon

by Cynthia Petrich

With support from the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Department (ECHO), the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is working to give a human face to the under-reported, unrepresented and marginalised group of Palestinians living in Lebanon without any form of identity.

Since DRC established an office in Lebanon in August 2004 we have identified around 3,000 individual non-ID refugees living in informal refugee camps in the south and the Beq'a valley. Unlike 1948 refugees, most are not settled in camps with support from networks of kin and neighbours but have arrived individually or in small groups. Many have complex experience of multiple displacements.

Some were already registered as 1948 refugees with UNRWA in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan or Syria but were exiled a second time. Some were expelled from the West Bank or Gaza by the Israeli occupation authorities. Others are former Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) combatants forced to leave Jordan in 1970 following the 'Black September' confrontation with the Jordanian government. Israel's expulsion of the PLO from Lebanon in 1982 left ex-fighters without any official protection. After the end of the Lebanese war in 1990 most militias

were dismantled and the government gradually regained control of the country. This positive outcome has,

however, brought new difficulties for undocumented refugees as Lebanese army checkpoints have limited their ability to move in search of employment.

In addition to the difficulties encountered by all Palestinian refugees in Lebanon [see article by Sherif Elsayed-Ali on 12-14] non-ID refugees face further restrictions.



They are unable to move outside camps for fear of being arrested. They cannot travel, own property, register

marriages, graduate from high school or enrol in either public or private higher education. They find it difficult to access UNRWA services and cannot afford to pay for healthcare in a country with an expensive and largely privatised medical system.

The greatest burden they carry is the fact their children do not have any legal existence. Three decades after their arrival most non-ID refugees have got married – either to a registered Palestinian refugee or, in some instances, to a Lebanese citizen. Under Lebanese law, the children of non-ID refugees, even when born in Lebanon, and even if their mother is

a registered refugee or a Lebanese citizen, are not legally recognised and hence do not possess any personal documentation attesting to their existence. A whole generation of undocumented persons is now coming of age with no prospect of participation in social and economic life.

Young undocumented refugees studying. This photograph was taken by non-ID refugees as part of the empowerment and advocacy activities run by DRC.

Assisting the undocumented refugees

In March 2005, DRC began legal counselling, advocacy and assistance activities to support the undocumented refugees. We have interviewed more than 150 families and compiled dossiers which we have submitted to relevant

local and international authorities – including UNRWA, UNHCR, the Palestinian Authority and the

governments of Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan and Syria. Each case is unique and requires an individual approach towards a solution.

One option we have proposed is the transfer of UNRWA files if the refugee has been registered with UNRWA in another field of operation. DRC has been advocating for the files of such refugees to be transferred to Lebanon in order to have them officially present in the country and to give their family a legal status. Unfortunately the Lebanese authorities have not been supportive. We have been unable to take up test

cases as other stakeholders have indicated they cannot move forward without the approval of Lebanon.

We are also advocating for renewal of expired third-country passports as many non-ID Palestinians once held passports, mainly Jordanian or Egyptian. The government of Egypt has been cooperative and has accepted to renew passports when we could prove a former link. Jordan has turned down all of our requests.

DRC has met with various Lebanese stakeholders and agencies to see if cases could be solved in Lebanon.

Inam, a Lebanese woman, is married to Mahmoud, a Palestinian refugee who fled Gaza in 1967 when it was occupied by Israel and who registered with the Egyptian authorities. In the mid 1970s Mahmoud travelled to Syria legally and then continued without proper documentation to Lebanon. Inam and Mahmoud's lives are blighted by his continued non-ID status. Their children cannot graduate from school and the family is not entitled to access UNRWA services. Their eldest child Fadia, 12, is very ill and without access to healthcare the family is struggling to survive. Inam recently paid \$300 to process registration papers for her children to a man purporting to be from the Ministry of Interior. Inam has not seen the man again and her children remain unregistered. Through DRC intervention, the family has now obtained new Egyptian passports and recently received a stay and work permit in Lebanon.

Nada, born in Lebanon in 1958, was registered with her parents as a 1948 Palestinian refugee. In 1979, she married Murad, a Palestinian refugee registered with UNRWA Jordan. Although Nada and Murad are both registered refugees, their documents, like those of many other families who have moved residence, have been mislaid by bureaucratic error. Nada, Murad and their nine children now live as non-ID refugees in a one-room house in southern Lebanon. DRC has provided legal aid to try to secure identity papers and is providing vocational training for the couple's older children.

Hassan was born in 1967 in Wahdat camp in Jordan and, like the rest of his family, is an UNRWA-registered 1948 refugee. His family arrived in Lebanon in 1970 as a result of Black September. His father, a PLO combatant, died in 1973 and Hassan lived in an orphanage until he was 15. In 1982, he was arrested by the Lebanese authorities and deported to Jordan where he was tortured and forced to remain to complete military service. Fearing further persecution, he fled Jordan and on arrival in Syria applied to UNHCR for refugee status. His claim was rejected due to his status as an UNRWA-registered refugee. On return to Lebanon, he was re-arrested by the Lebanese authorities for lacking documentation. After again contacting UNHCR in Damascus he was arrested by Syrian intelligence services in Lebanon who then contacted the Jordanian authorities. The Jordanians revoked his Jordanian nationality and invalidated his passport. Fearing imprisonment in Syria, Hassan travelled to Iraqi Kurdistan where he survived by selling his blood.

In 1999 he travelled clandestinely through Syria back to Lebanon. Both UNHCR and UNRWA said they were unable to offer him any assistance. He now lives in Beirut, in constant fear of re-imprisonment and with little hope for a future. DRC has provided Hassan with legal aid to attempt to secure identity papers to permit travel and residency.

The issue remains sensitive but there seems to be a growing willingness to acknowledge the need to improve the humanitarian situation of Palestinians in Lebanon. DRC has supported cases to obtain stay and work permits for non-ID refugees who hold foreign passports and who have met other criteria set by the Lebanese authorities during an amnesty period for illegal aliens. Seven families have now obtained such documents.

DRC additionally supports the issuance of stay permits to spouses and children of Lebanese female citizens, who can only reside in Lebanon on the condition that they do not hold any occupation. DRC has started lawsuits in partnership with a Lebanese law firm in order to establish the identity of some of the non-ID refugees. These include underage undocumented children recognised by a registered father and children of a widow whose husband was undocumented. Finally, DRC supports the efforts of a national coalition for the right of Lebanese women who are married to a foreigner to extend their citizenship to their children. If this change were made, about 15% of the non-ID refugees' cases could be solved.

Some claimants may have a well-founded fear of persecution and could be in need of international protection. In cases where a legal solution cannot be found in Lebanon, DRC has approached UNHCR.

The work for the undocumented refugees in Lebanon remains difficult. It demands patience, perseverance and preparedness to accept many rebuffs and enjoy few successes. We have explored various avenues towards solutions. It is important that NGOs and UN agencies should continue their efforts to act as intermediaries between refugees and the Lebanese authorities and seek to solve individual cases. A comprehensive solution, however, requires regional dialogue between the Lebanese, Egyptian, Jordanian, Palestinian and Syrian authorities.

Cynthia Petrigh is Programme Manager for the Danish Refugee Council in Lebanon. Email: cynthia.petrigh@gmail.com For further information, see www.drc.dk/Lebanon.1740.0.html