Life in a Tent... The Unending Plight of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

Samar el Kadi*

When Syrians fled their war-torn country for the relative safety of neighboring Lebanon, they little imagined that almost four years on, they would still be there. As the humanitarian assistance which they have been relying on runs out and the tolerance of their hosts wears thin, their living conditions have dramatically deteriorated. What is it like for the Syrian refugees who continue to spend years of their lives in poorly equipped tents in miserable conditions? Samar el Kadi reports from the Bekaa valley in eastern Lebanon.

* Samar el Kadi is a Red Cross Spokeswoman in Lebanon

They came in several batches, fleeing an unrelenting war that wrought death and destruction upon their homes. The Syrian conflict, now in its fourth year, forced many families to flee across the border to seek safety in neighboring countries, including Lebanon. The majority arrived during the first three years of the conflict, with meager savings, tired and hungry. They needed basic assistance including shelter, food and healthcare. Back in Syria, they had homes, relatives, friends and livelihoods. Now they have nothing.

Lebanon is overwhelmed by almost 1.2 million Syrian refugees, now equal to one-quarter of the country's population of 4.2 million.

Lebanon is overwhelmed by almost 1.2 million Syrian refugees, now equal to one-quarter of the country's population of 4.2 million. Their prolonged presence is placing clear strain on the small country's fragile economy and infrastructure, in addition to posing security threats, which have created growing resentment among the local population.

In the absence of official camps, the majority of the refugees have found shelter in random tent settlements across the country, and other makeshift locations such as basements, storefronts and buildings under construction. After more than three years of self-exile in Lebanon, their miserable conditions were not improving – and the future holds little hope.

Harsh living conditions

As dawn breaks over the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon, Abu Hassan wakes up and steers out of his tent where his nine children and his wife are still sleeping on thin mattresses on a rug covering the bare ground. He first says his morning prayer, his body facing the Qibla, direction of the Moslem holy shrine of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, before starting another day in voluntary exile. The 44-year-old man is among more than 1.2 million Syrian refugees who have fled a terrible war in their home country, seeking refuge in Lebanon.

For almost two years, since he escaped from under the bombs in his hometown of Kuneitra in south Syria, Abu Hassan and his family have been sharing a 50-square-meter tent in the informal camp in the town of Taalbaya, which is also "home" for some 600 Syrian refugees. "First thing I would do in the morning, after the prayer, is wake two of my children who go to a camp

school where they learn the basic alphabets, merely how to read and write, just enough not to be completely illiterate," Abu Hassan said.

His other seven children do not go to school. They have been deprived of education for almost four years, since the outbreak of hostilities in Syria in March 2011. "We are not thinking about education for the children, as we struggle to secure our basic needs in order to survive and that is food and healthcare."

For almost two years, since he escaped from under the bombs in his hometown of Kuneitra in south Syria, Abu Hassan and his family have been sharing a 50-square-meter tent in the informal camp in the town of Taalbaya, which is also "home" for some 600 Syrian refugees.

The overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon rely almost entirely on food assistance provided by the World Food Program (WFP) through electronic food vouchers, also known as blue cards, which are topped up with a monthly amount of US $30 per family member, which the refugees can use to buy food from contracted local shops. In early December, WFP sounded the alarm over an urgent funding deficit. It suspended its food assistance briefly, reinstating it ten days later after it had succeeded in securing money from a global fundraising campaign and a public appeal, but only enough to meet the refugees' food needs for the month of December.

The overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon rely almost entirely on food assistance provided by the World Food Program (WFP) through electronic food vouchers, also known as blue cards, which are topped up with a monthly amount of US $30 per family member, which the refugees can use to buy food from contracted local shops.

After more than three and a half years of the protracted crisis, international donors appear to be showing signs of fatigue, triggering fears of a looming hunger crisis for hundreds of thousands of the most vulnerable refugees. "It was mass panic across the camp when we were told that food aid would be cut. And what a great relief when we knew that it was restored, otherwise we would have gone hungry," said Abu Hassan.

Unable to work, the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon, of which an estimated 50 percent are under 18, depend on assistance for food, education and healthcare. Like most of his countrymen, Abu Hassan has struggled to find occasional day jobs on construction sites, in agricultural fields or in factories, to secure some sort of income. "I have tried to work on more than one occasion, but each time it was harsh labor that was poorly paid. It is the same with all the Syrian refugees, we are simply abused and exploited as cheap labor," he said. Abu Hassan prefers, instead,

to sit all day in his tent, helping his wife to look after the children and listening to news from home. "We fled instant death at home. But we are experiencing slow death here… We are surviving day by day," he said.

Most refugees in Lebanon are concentrated in the Bekaa valley and in the northern part of the country, with the majority sheltering in tents, and wood or tin shacks in hundreds of informal settlements spread out in fields and outskirts of towns. Though Lebanon has maintained an open border policy and new refugees receive an initial aid package from local and international humanitarian organizations after registering with the UNHCR, many of the difficulties faced by refugee families stem from the Lebanese government's decision not to allow the construction of formal refugee camps.

Lebanon's experience with Palestinian refugee camps - which ended up becoming permanent settlements - raised fears that the same scenario would be repeated with the Syrians.

Lebanon's experience with Palestinian refugee camps - which ended up becoming permanent settlements - raised fears that the same scenario would be repeated with the Syrians. However, the lack of formal camps has made it extremely difficult for aid agencies to provide adequate assistance and services, such as education and health care. In addition, most refugees are paying rent for the land their tents are pitched on, and face eviction if they cannot pay.

However, Lebanon began imposing tight restrictions on the entry of Syrian refugees in early 2014, after the country had reached saturation level amid insufficient international support to cater for the refugee influx.

Bracing for another harsh winter

With winter settling in, strong winds and heavy rains have caused roofs to collapse, and partially flooded tents. Many refugees have dug trenches around the tents to deal with the rain. For some of them, this is their fourth winter in the unheated tents - which may provide some shelter from rain, but no protection from the sometimes sub-freezing temperatures.

Rows of shabby tents with plastic sheeting line up narrow and muddy dirt alleys in Qob Elias, one of the many makeshift Syrian refugee settlements dotted across the Bekaa countryside.

Barefoot children run around in the freezing puddles, wearing light clothes, inadequate for the winter cold.

"My daughter was born in this tent and died in it," recalled Mahmoud, who fled his hometown of Raqqa, in northeastern Syria, and settled in Qob Elias three years ago. His "beautiful baby Salma" was three-month-old when her frail body succumbed to the cold in her family's unheated tent in the midst of a snow storm that hit Lebanon last year. "My daughter came into this world and left it without having a single picture taken. The world does not know that she had existed. All of us, Syrians, have become mere numbers", Mahmoud said as he wiped out tears with the back of his hand.

"My daughter came into this world and left it without having a single picture taken. The world does not know that she had existed. All of us, Syrians, have become mere numbers"

The distressed father said he had begged for extra covers to prevent the cold from seeping into his daughter's small body, but his pleas fell into deaf ears. "On the third day of the storm, I rushed Salma to the nearest hospital, but the cold had seeped into her veins. After examining her, the doctor told me that she wasn't sick, but that her lungs had collapsed because of the cold. Half an hour later she was dead."

In an adjacent tent in the sprawling camp, thirty year-old Arwa, a widow from Aleppo, is struggling to protect her six children from the winter cold. She placed several mattresses on top of each other to avoid getting wet. She set fire to a pot full of timber outside until it turned into embers, which she later brought into the tent to warm it up. She repeats this several times throughout the day.

"It is freezing in winter, and suffocating in summer," she said of her tent, which is equivalent to a few wooden poles planted in the dirt, covered by a canvas on which the UNHCR logo is printed. In summer days, she said, it is not possible to sit inside the tent for more than five minutes. Heat trapped inside the nylon canvas raises the inner temperature to more than 35 degrees.

Arwa crosses a one-kilometer distance several times a day to fetch water for drinking and cooking. "It is either beans, or lentils or rice," she said mockingly of her family's almost daily diet for the past two years. "It is cheap and filling, but it would do better with some tomatoes or potatoes for a change."

Child labor

Under the tattered canvas of their tents, stories abound and tragedies surround refugees daily. As the months have passed, many have gotten used to living in tents. “Have you ever asked yourselves how refugees spend years of their life inside a tent,” demanded 65-year-old Umm Ahmad. “It simply becomes your home, because you have no other choice, nowhere else to go,” she answered.

“Every morning, as soon as I wake up, I pray for peace to be restored in Syria, I pray for my children who are still stuck there and live under the bombs without food, or water, or electricity or medical care,” she said, with tears rolling down her wrinkled cheeks.

Umm Ahmad, a widow, shares a small tent with four of her children, the youngest of 11 - the rest stayed back home in the besieged area of Ghouta Sharqiya, near Damascus. “Every morning, as soon as I wake up, I pray for peace to be restored in Syria, I pray for my children who are still stuck there and live under the bombs without food, or water, or electricity or medical care,” she said, with tears rolling down her wrinkled cheeks.

Her daily routine consists of collecting firewood from fields just outside the camp to make the bonfire she needs for cooking and heating her tent. None of her children goes to school. Her three daughters help in the cooking and cleaning, while her 12-year-old son, Dergham, works as a coffee boy in a company office.

“He goes out at seven in the morning, and does not come back before six. He works almost 12 hours a day for which he earns two thousand pounds (less than US $1.5) only, but it is better than nothing at all,” Umm Ahmad said.

She complained that the food assistance her family was getting is insufficient, and that they need every extra penny they can get. “This life is unbearable. But we can’t do anything about it. We have to survive, until we are able to go back home,” Umm Ahmad contended.

Although there are no official statistics, private estimates say more than 200,000 Syrian children aged on average between 10 and 14 live and work in the streets or are employed in agriculture and factories to help pay for food and shelter for their families.

Furthermore, formal schooling is neither affordable nor acces-

sible for the vast majority of Syrian children. Only one in five Syrian refugee children were believed to be enrolled in formal education programs in Lebanon in 2014.

Malnutrition

The humanitarian crisis resulting from the Syrian conflict is already the largest refugee crisis in a generation, and one of the largest since the Second World War, according to humanitarian organizations.

Syrians in Lebanon have fled from their home to seek safety, but are now increasingly vulnerable as basic assistance, including food, appears to be under serious threat. Food security concerns have been exacerbated following WFP's warnings that it will be unable to feed refugees in 2015 unless additional funds are secured.

According to humanitarian workers and nutrition experts, refugee children will bear the biggest toll of a shortage in aid. Stopping the food assistance would have a detrimental impact on refugee children's health and normal growth, especially among children under five, warned Dr. Zeroual Azzedine, chief nutritionist at UNICEF Lebanon.

According to humanitarian workers and nutrition experts, refugee children will bear the biggest toll of a shortage in aid. Stopping the food assistance would have a detrimental impact on refugee children's health and normal growth, especially among children under five, warned Dr. Zeroual Azzedine, chief nutritionist at UNICEF Lebanon.

"For children in the first years of life, nutrition is a matter of survival for the body and mind. If they are not fed properly, their brain abilities are affected and this is an irreversible damage," Azzedine said, adding that in emergency or displacement situations food security is first priority.

"By giving them at least the stability of food on the table and keeping them healthy, you make sure they get a good start in life and a chance for a better future," commented UNICEF spokesman Salam Abdel Munem. "If they don't have the basics, then the push for a better start in life will go away and that's the real danger for many (refugee) children in Lebanon," Abdel Munem added.

With a predominantly youthful refugee population, the risk of malnutrition, juvenile crime, and drugs is real, and bound to get

worse if a food scarcity emerges. At least 900 cases of malnutrition have been detected among Syrian refugee children in 2014 in camps across the Bekaa, according to the International Orthodox Christian Charity (IOCC), which runs a program for screening and treating severely malnourished children under five.

"The figure is not high enough to call for a malnutrition emergency, but we should be ready for it, because we fear that conditions might get worse in case of food cuts or reduction for Syrian refugees," IOCC country representative Linda Berberi said. "Syrian refugee children under five are the most vulnerable and can be quickly affected by undernourishment and poor hygiene which can be detrimental for their lives if it is not handled rapidly and properly."

She explained that IOCC is currently engaged in capacity building of medical staff in clinics providing primary health care for refugees across Lebanon in order to enable them to screen, detect and treat acute cases of malnutrition. "We are also putting in place a surveillance system under which children under five would be closely monitored and followed up over a year, after their height and weight had been recorded," said Berberi.

Malnutrition is just one consequence of food cuts which would likely lead to an increase in child labor in addition to early marriages for girls. "There are hundreds of thousands of children doing physically hard jobs and very long hours, but without having proper food, their health risks increase tremendously," UNICEF's Azzaddine said.

Malnutrition is just one consequence of food cuts which would likely lead to an increase in child labor in addition to early marriages for girls. "There are hundreds of thousands of children doing physically hard jobs and very long hours, but without having proper food, their health risks increase tremendously," UNICEF's Azzaddine said.

He noted that the trend of early marriages for girls was also on the rise among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, especially among families with big financial stress, who seek to shift the burden of feeding girls to other families.

"The bigger the stress of food security is, the more there is early marriages, and more children are pushed to drop out of school to seek work that often endanger their well-being and expose them to abuse and exploitation," said Azzadine.

Discrimination

In addition to food insecurity and inadequate living conditions, Syrian refugees in Lebanon are facing increasing violence from the local population. Simmering tensions caused by the long-term presence of a large number of refugees, competing for limited resources and straining an already fragile infrastructure, in a small country like Lebanon were inflamed after Syrian jihadi militants kidnapped and killed Lebanese security forces in border clashes in August last year.

A string of reprisal attacks targeting refugees in the past few months included torching their tents in northern and eastern Lebanon, and rounding up scores of them found lacking legal identification papers.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) said that resentment in Lebanon against Syrian refugees has grown amid accusations that militants were hiding among the displaced population. Refugees were stabbed, shot and beaten badly in many instances, in obvious reprisals to clashes between the Lebanese Army and Syrian militants in the border town of Arsal, on the eastern Lebanese-Syrian frontier, HRW said.

Some Lebanese also complain that refugees are taking jobs, driving down wages, overloading schools and hospitals, and placing massive strains on the infrastructure. Discrimination against them is discouraging many refugees from seeking work to make extra income. “They accuse us of depriving them of work opportunities, because the Syrian would accept to get paid half the amount of money that a Lebanese would get for doing the same work,” Abu Hassan complained.

To avoid mistreatment, Abu Hassan prefers to stay confined in his tent or roaming around the camp. “Why should I go out, there is no work to find anyway”, he said. “Even if I find something to do, it is mostly hard labor that is not remunerated. We are humiliated and treated badly. I prefer to die of hunger, rather than be humiliated.”

Back home, Abu Hassan, a contractor, owned property and lived a decent and respectable life, but he lost everything during the war. “I fled Syria to save my life and that of my family. The only

good thing here is that shells are not falling on our heads, otherwise, life is extremely bad here... It is not a life." "When war ends in Syria, I would return home immediately… Even if I have to go back on foot," he said.

Before the war in Syria, hundreds of thousands of low-cost Syrian labor were employed in Lebanon as unskilled workers, primarily doing hard physical jobs on construction sites, sending millions of dollars in remittances to their families back home. But with the big influx after the outbreak of hostilities, many Syrians started competing in other businesses, provoking tensions with the local population.

Looming Disaster

With no foreseeable solution to the raging conflict in Syria, the conditions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are bound to become even more precarious in the near future if the international community fails to provide more support.

With no foreseeable solution to the raging conflict in Syria, the conditions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are bound to become even more precarious in the near future if the international community fails to provide more support. WFP spokeswoman in Lebanon Sandy Maroun underlined that "the only consistent assistance the refugees were getting is that of WFP, and they might be losing it."

Lebanon and the United Nations asked the international community for a record $2.14 billion in funds to finance refugee response plans in 2015. In a recent appeal, WFP urged international donors to ensure the funds necessary to avert a looming disaster for Syrian refugees.

"Lack of access to even basic livelihood opportunities and diminished access to food and other assistance will make these families even more vulnerable and destitute and children will certainly become even more at risk," WFP said. "We shouldn't leave millions of refugees not only without hope, but without basic means to survive," she added.

The specter of a hunger crisis is exacerbating fears among many refugees who say they would prefer to go home and die in the war than starve from hunger. "At least there, they call us martyrs when we die. They won't say we died from hunger," said Ahmad Shaaban, another refugee in Qob Elias camp.

As the sun sets in the Bekaa, Arwa settles in her tent, exhausted at the end of yet another day in exile. It is not the baby crying with colic in the adjacent tent that keeps her awake, but worry about feeding her family the next day. They have been refugees in Lebanon for three years now. “Life in Lebanon cannot get worse,” she said. “It doesn’t get better either… We just want to go home.”