

LEBANON REELS UNDER DOUBLE BLOW OF COVID-19 AND ECONOMIC CRISIS

By Alex Pollock

The past six months have brought hardships unseen in Lebanon even during the bitter days of its 15-year civil conflict that ended in 1990. Already ravaged livelihoods are now buckling under the economic disruptions of the coronavirus pandemic. While the anti-establishment protests that erupted last year called for freedom, secularism and unity, the tone of demonstrations has shifted to something more visceral and immediate; an outcry of people fighting for their very survival. (*Al Jazeera*)

Lebanon and the Coronavirus

A Palestinian woman from Syria has become the first person living in a Lebanese refugee camp to be diagnosed with the coronavirus, causing an increase in testing in the camps. So far, Lebanon has recorded 22 deaths from 696 cases. Many people fear the virus could spread rapidly through the refugee camps because of the lack of healthcare resources available to refugees. The country has been under lockdown since 15 March and has been advised by the defence council to extend the lockdown through 10 May. Other restrictions in place include overnight curfews and reduced operations for businesses. However, due to the country's current economic crisis, the government has laid out a five-stage plan to reopen many local businesses over the coming months.

Lebanon's economic crisis

Lebanon's economy has lacked stability for nearly a decade, but over the last year the value of the Lebanese pound has plummeted from the standard 1,500 pounds to the dollar rate to almost 4,000 pounds to the dollar. Many Lebanese keep their savings in the bank as foreign currency, and the recent economic decline, has cut thousands of salaries in half. That coupled with the world's third largest debt to gross domestic product ratio has sent many Lebanese into panic as they struggle to provide for their families. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has predicted that Lebanon's economy will drop 12% this year, the third worst global prediction.

Several banks have severely limited the amount of cash withdrawals allowed, and in some cases have stopped withdrawals altogether. The Lebanese government has promised aid to families in need, but little has actually been delivered. Deep-rooted corruption has led to aid being sent to families in exchange for political allegiance, leaving several thousand people without help. According to reports given to *Al Jazeera* – of the 150,000 families who were registered for aid – only around 50,000 received the cash payments promised.

The economic crisis was one of the main reasons for the start of the revolution in October 2019, but the protests were interrupted by the threat of the coronavirus. What started as a revolution addressing injustice, inequality, and corruption, has become a movement of people fighting for survival. Many have resumed street protests, increasing the threat of the possible spread of the virus. Recent protests have closed roads, and the army has been deployed for crowd control. Protesters have aimed explosive devices at banks and financial centres to highlight their dissatisfaction with the perceived economic and political corruption.

The Lebanese government has tried to devise a plan for economic reconstruction with the IMF, however, the plan hinges on almost \$10 billion in foreign aid. With several countries dealing with their own financial problems stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, such aid is unlikely to be readily available any time soon. Lebanese Social Affairs Minister Ramzi Moucharafieh estimated that over 75% of the population needs immediate financial aid. The *Human Rights Watch* released a warning statement in early April that if a "robust" aid programme is not implemented soon, millions of people are at risk of going hungry.



Effect on refugees

With the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in a refugee camp, fear is growing among those in the camps, according to interviews conducted by *Human Rights Watch*. The Lebanese government has enforced restrictions on refugees that do not apply to Lebanese citizens in at least 21 municipalities, such as stricter curfews and tighter constraints on movement. The restrictions on refugees were also put into place prior to when the whole nation came under lockdown. The same research by *Human Rights Watch* found that those living in refugee camps do not have adequate education on what to do if they experience symptoms, or even what the symptoms are. Many refugees cited fears of further discrimination, or even deportation, if they seek treatment for symptoms.

Nearly a quarter of Lebanon's seven million residents are refugees – mainly Syrian and Palestinian – and the risk of COVID-19 spreading is further increased due to the lack of proper sanitation in the camps. A lack of running water and low supplies of soap increases the risk of infection still further. The UN has agreed to pay for treatment of registered refugees, but only after those who experience symptoms contact the coronavirus hotline. The cost of healthcare in Lebanon has skyrocketed for everyone due to the economic crisis, but refugees face additional barriers as many have no income at all due to work restrictions placed on them by the Lebanese government.

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Lebanon is a unique nation in the Middle East, as Christian representation within the government is formerly recognised and is a requirement – to ensure that all major religions in society are represented. This allows believers a fair degree of freedom in how they share the gospel with non-believers in their communities. The rising economic crisis, combined with the coronavirus precautions, has forced Christians to adjust the way they do evangelism, but (according to an *INcontext* contact in Lebanon) the new-found creativity is sparking a spiritual awakening. Muslims and other non-believers are reaching out to Christians, requesting prayer in the name of Jesus. Churches are stepping up and providing both physical and spiritual nourishment for their communities, and many are participating in online church services and prayer meetings. An increased dialogue between Lebanese Christians and their non-Christian neighbours is resulting in people coming to Christ through the power of prayer and relational ministry. However, while the church is seeing fruit from the current crisis, congregations are not immune to the struggles. Many congregations and Christian individuals are struggling to provide for their congregations and families. These struggles are multiplied within refugee communities where people are often dealing with other issues such as past trauma and physical illnesses. The economic crisis does not only affect non-believers, so we should continue to lift the Lebanese Church in prayer.

Please pray with us:

- For financial support for churches, NGO's and individuals who are committed to providing relief to those suffering around them
- For increased dialogue between Lebanese Christians and their non-Christian neighbours
- For the refugees who cannot easily access health care and for local believers and NGOs to be allowed to enter the camps and provide the needs of the refugees

IMAGE:

REUTERS/Omar Ibrahim