Operational context

The ongoing conflict in Syria continues to have an impact on the political and security situation in Lebanon. The sectarian tension over major political issues remains high.

On 23-25 June, the Lebanese Army fought supporters of the cleric Sheikh Ahmad Assir following a clash between his supporters and Hizbollah supporters in Saida, where Ein El Hilweh Camp, the largest Palestine refugee camp in Lebanon, is located. The clashes left at least 40-50 dead and over two hundred wounded. Since then, Sheikh Assir has remained in hiding.

In Beqaa and the North, clashes between supporters of both sides in the Syrian conflict continue to take place, amidst on-going cross-border shelling. A number of security incidents are recorded each week. Three serious attacks using vehicle-borne improvised explosive devises (VBIED) were carried out in July and August; two in the southern suburbs of Beirut, on 9 July and 15 August; and in Tripoli on 23 August, outside two mosques. The attacks left over seventy dead.

The impasse in forming a Cabinet remains and eight months later a caretaker Government led by Najib Mikati is still in place. Despite several attempts to reach a consensus, an agreement has not been reached and there is currently no sign of the political impasse being resolved.

Amidst this political and security instability, the Palestine refugee population has not been drawn into the conflict. The local Palestinian leadership has repeated its disassociation from any domestic or regional conflicts. There have been isolated incidents related to tension between Palestinians and local Lebanese communities, but in all instances, community leaders from both sides have joined forces in preventing further escalation of the situation.

The most pressing issues for the Lebanon Field Office remain the continued influx of Palestine refugees from Syria (PRS) to Lebanon, and the incomplete reconstruction and reduced emergency relief assistance in Nahr el Bared Camp (NBC) in Northern Lebanon. Over 50,000 PRS are currently receiving assistance from UNRWA in Lebanon. The most pressing issues for PRS are shelter and protection concerns. UNRWA provides PRS with all basic services such as health care, education and relief services. Increased tension has been observed within the camps between the local Palestine refugee population and the incoming refugees as a result of over-crowdedness, competition for employment at ever lower salaries, rising prices and other factors contributing to the increasing number of refugees from Syria.

Due to insufficient funding since last year, UNRWA had to harmonize parts of the emergency relief services to the displaced families from NBC with those provided to all Palestine refugees in Lebanon including PRS: for hospitalisation coverage as of 1 September and for food assistance as of 1
October. UNRWA also announced that rental assistance will be targeted, reducing the eligible families by approximately one-third, as of 1 October. Since the announcement of these changes, various UNRWA installations in Northern Lebanon have been closed by protestors and a protest tent has been blocking one of the gates of the Lebanon Field Office compound. This has so far prevented rental and food assistance from being delivered for the fourth quarter cycle of 2013 but discussions with the Palestinian leadership to ensure the delivery of assistance in Northern Lebanon are underway.

**Accomplishments**

In response to the steady increase of PRS in Lebanon during the last year, Lebanon Field Office has bolstered its emergency staff and set up structured coordination mechanisms under the leadership of an Emergency Coordinator, seconded by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB). A Monitoring and Reporting Officer at the Masnaa border has been established. Thanks to generous funding from EU, US and other donors, all PRS have immediate access to UNRWA schools, health clinics and hospitalisation through referrals. UNRWA launched a new initiative in October to provide PRS with ATM cards which replaces the cash-in-hand distribution method that started in December 2012. The new card system has many benefits. It gives beneficiaries more dignity in their plight, and reduces UNRWA's overhead costs while minimizing the security risk associated with cash-in-hand distribution. Distribution intervals depend on the level of funding received.

Most Palestine refugees in Lebanon have virtually no alternative to UNRWA’s health care services, making them entirely reliant on UNRWA for these services. The Agency continues to implement reforms in its health programme in Lebanon by improving primary health care services and consolidating the enhancements introduced earlier in secondary and tertiary care. The family health team approach has been fully introduced in 18 of the Agency’s health clinics in Lebanon. By the end of 2013, the approach will have been introduced in 25 out of 27 UNRWA clinics in Lebanon. This holistic approach aims at providing better services to patients with the same amount of resources and reducing the need for hospitalisation referrals by improving preventive medical care, increasing consultation time and enhancing doctor-patient consultations. The quality of service is expected to improve in the clinics that have introduced this approach. By the end of 2013 the e-health module will have been introduced in four UNRWA clinics in Lebanon. The e-health module will be a tool to facilitate health centre management with each patient having an electronic record accessible at any UNRWA clinic.

LFO and the UNRWA-HQ Education Department have worked closely together on implementing education reform to improve curricula and teaching methods and to strengthen inclusive services. This has been made possible with long-standing support from the EU, which has been extended by five more years. UNRWA has made it a priority to enrol PRS students into UNRWA schools and provide them with the best education possible. Currently, around 7,200 PRS students are enrolled in UNRWA schools.

UNRWA has embarked on implementing major infrastructure improvement and shelter rehabilitation projects in camps across Lebanon. One of these projects will enable access to potable water for the residents in Mar Elias, Burj Barajneh and Shatila Camps in Beirut thanks to Swiss funding. Its outcome will depend on community participation. In Rashidieh, comprehensive improvement of the camp’s water systems and additional shelter rehabilitation is being implemented under a German funded participatory camp improvement project. In Ein el Hilweh Camp, water and waste water systems are going through rehabilitation in four separate parts funded by the EU, JICA and the Saudi Fund for Development, two of which are already underway. Over 3,000 shelters in the field have been identified as unsafe and unhealthy and are in need of rehabilitation. The “self-help approach” for shelter rehabilitation has been a proven success. Families build their own shelters, with the support of UNRWA engineers who also guide the refugees through the design process of the shelters. This speeds up the construction time and significantly reduces costs.

UNRWA remains committed to gender equality and gender equity through empowering Palestine refugee women and girls. UNRWA follows a twin-track approach of mainstreaming gender equality in all its policies, procedures and practices, including its emergency preparedness and response, while allowing for targeted interventions to counter particular inequalities or gaps in empowerment, participation and access for women, girls, boys and men. Vulnerable girls and women are targeted
with specific interventions aiming to build their potentials and capacities to enhance their opportunities. The specific interventions include access to microcredit, vocational training, life skills and psychosocial support and, awareness raising activities on topics such as healthcare, human rights and gender-based violence (GBV). With funding from the USG, UNRWA is implementing the Family Protection Intervention to deliver comprehensive services to survivors of GBV. Survivors of GBV are assisted with healthcare, psychological, social, legal and economic interventions both directly and through a referral system in partnership with community-based organisations (CBO), local and international NGOs.

Challenges

Providing services to PRS, while maintaining the same level of core services for Palestine refugees in Lebanon, will be the main challenge for UNRWA in 2014. On 7 November, 50,000 PRS had been recorded with UNRWA. The projection is that by end of 2014, 100,000 PRS have fled to Lebanon. The ability of the Lebanon-based Palestinian community to absorb, support, and host additional refugees from Syria is limited. Even under normal circumstances, UNRWA in Lebanon is struggling to help meet the needs of its beneficiaries with limited rights and severely curtailed access to public services and job opportunities. The arrival of additional refugees from Syria multiplies the burden on both the Palestinian community and UNRWA services. PRS in Lebanon are particularly vulnerable. They have no right to work and are refugees twice over, while 41% of families are headed by women. They are mainly seeking refuge with the local Palestinian population where two in three are already living in poverty, and the majority are jobless.

The Government of Lebanon has opened its borders to most refugees from Syria throughout the conflict. However, since early August 2013, many PRS have been denied entry into Lebanon at the border. PRS are required to pay an entry visa fee of $17 per person whereas Syrians are exempt from this entry visa fee. Additionally, in the coming months many PRS will have to renew their visa in order to extend their stay beyond one year. The visa renewal fee is around $200 which the overwhelming majority cannot afford. This will add to the protection concerns for PRS and UNRWA is seeking guarantees from the Lebanese Authorities that PRS without a valid visa will not be detained, imprisoned or deported.

Securing funds for emergency relief services in Nahr el Bared (NBC) has become significantly more difficult. Progress has been made in reconstruction of houses in Packages one and two, and part of Package three, which have now been handed over to approximately one quarter of the displaced families. The remainder of Package three remains under construction, with contracts currently being finalised for Package four. The construction of the Health Centre and the fifth of the six school complexes have recently been completed, enabling the use of prefabricated schools in NBC to be discontinued. However, only 55 per cent of the funding for the reconstruction has been secured, which falls short of fully covering the fourth Package out of eight with funding of USD 157 million still required to pay for the reconstruction of Packages five to eight. As long as the reconstruction remains incomplete there will be a continued need to provide relief for the most vulnerable among the displaced.

The tension and volatility of the operating environment has deteriorated in the last six months. Across the field, UNRWA staff have been threatened and access to UNRWA installations, both in the north and other areas, have been blocked frequently by protesters. These actions have caused delays in the delivery of services and some UNRWA installations remain closed. Any further reduction in services would have the potential to further destabilise security, affecting not only the camps but also the overall security situation in the country, particularly in the north.

UNRWA continues to advocate for Palestine refugees’ right to work in Lebanon. Some minor improvements have been made, with the process for eligible Palestine refugees to obtain work permits becoming less cumbersome. Nevertheless, the lack of progress on the implementation of the amendments causes disillusionment and frustration among the refugees, particularly youth as they lack opportunities to find meaningful jobs and continue to face legal restrictions. The lack of this basic human right directly contributes to the poor socio-economic situation of Palestine refugees in Lebanon.
Opportunities

LFO continues to work on improving relations with key stakeholders, including officials, political and community leaders and key members of Lebanese society. The relationship with NGOs and other organisations working on Palestinian issues in Lebanon has continued to improve, in part through closer cooperation on assisting PRS in Lebanon. UNRWA’s relationship with the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC) and the Embassy of Palestine remains strong. UNRWA welcomes the process of strengthening the institutional role of LPDC.

LFO maintains good cooperation and regular coordination with other UN agencies working on the issue of refugees from Syria. This includes working closely with WFP regarding food assistance to PRS, including towards a future agreement for the two agencies to cooperate more closely on this issue. In the coming months, UNRWA will introduce further targeting of its assistance to the PRS according to vulnerability. UNRWA is also working closely with UNICEF on education, psycho-social support and other interventions for vulnerable PRS children.

UNRWA continues to prioritise empowering Palestine refugee youth in line with the Commissioner General’s 2012 Youth Commitments. Lebanon Field is proceeding with a range of inter-linked initiatives that target youth unemployment and exclusion through offering scholarships and vocational training opportunities, career guidance and assistance in job seeking. LFO’s vocational training programme is rolling out a range of reforms to upgrade the vocational training curriculum in line with market needs, and creating paths to further education and practical work experience. LFO is advancing its aim to ensure vocational courses are accredited with the Lebanese Ministry of Education. Recreation and youth engagement are being strengthened through upgrading sport and recreation facilities, extending partnerships with youth organisations, strengthening school parliaments and supporting youth to undertake voluntary work in their communities. Lebanon Field is responding to the needs of young PRS, and has, thanks to UNICEF funding, opened 15 centres that provide education, recreational activities and psycho-social support.

LFO has introduced improvements to its relief and social services programme by redesigning the criteria for its Special Hardship Programme (SHAP). As the new model is consolidated, it will achieve better targeting of the poorest in need of assistance through more accurate assessments. The changes have been accepted by the community and its leadership. Appeal committees have been set up for disputed cases of families who have lost their Special Hardship Case status or have had their applications for inclusion under the new system rejected. LFO will continue stepping up its work with people with disabilities. The “Special People, Special Focus” initiative works on mainstreaming and inclusiveness in all of the Agency’s activities, from improving accessibility to UNRWA installations to raising awareness and providing training to staff.

Maintaining UNRWA’s level and quality of services in the coming months will be a challenge. Lebanon Field will continue with its reforms, despite the pressure on its resources whilst aiming to improve its services to the beneficiaries it serves.