

(Translated from Arabic)

**Permanent Mission of Lebanon
to the United Nations Office and international organizations
Geneva**

Beirut, 22 June 2021

Reply from the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Emigrants to the joint communication addressed to the Lebanese Government by the Special Rapporteurs on adequate housing, the human rights of internally displaced persons, and the human rights of migrants

Set out below are the most salient points of the reply to joint communication No. AL LBN 5/2021 dated 23 April 2021, which was addressed to the Lebanese Government, through the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Emigrants, by the Special Rapporteurs on adequate housing, the human rights of internally displaced persons, and the human rights of migrants, who hold mandates from the United Nations Human Rights Council.

The joint communication concerns two incidents involving Lebanese citizens and Syrian displaced persons that took place in Bcharre town, on 23 November 2020, and in Zouk Bhannine, on 26 December 2020, and necessitated intervention and follow-up by civil, military and security agencies.

The reply is based on information received by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants about the two said incidents from the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of National Defence, and the Ministry of the Interior and Municipalities through the Directorate-General of Internal Security Forces.

1. Background

- Lebanon remains the country hosting the largest number of displaced persons in relation to population size.
- The Syrian displaced persons who came to Lebanon when crisis erupted in their country in 2011 now live in residential blocks and apartments in all Lebanese governorates. A large proportion of them – around 22 per cent – live in informal settlements.
- In Bcharre town, the presence of Syrians predates the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011. They worked in the agricultural sector and there is no record of any incidents between them and the town's inhabitants. Syrian displaced persons have been living safely in the town with their families since 2011 without being subjected to any form of harassment.
- In Zouk Bhannine town, a number of Syrian displaced persons are currently living in a camp consisting of 86 tented shelters made of wood, cloth and plastic sheeting, which are crammed into an area of 5,000 square meters. The camp is located near the main road on private property owned by ██████████, a resident of the town. For over 20 years, this camp has existed as a “workshop” for Syrians employed in agriculture and construction, who then gradually brought their families to Zouk Bhannine following the eruption of the Syrian crisis in 2011.

2. Facts of the Bcharre incident:

- On 23 November 2020, in a sudden dispute in Bcharre town, Syrian national ██████████ - born to mother ██████████ in 1993 (registration No. 11) in Sufah in the Syrian Arab Republic - fired a military pistol at Lebanese national ██████████ - born to mother ██████████ in 1992 (registration No. 16) in the Seydat district of Bcharre – which led to his death.
- As soon as news of the crime spread through Bcharre town, inhabitants gathered in front of the victim's home on the Bcharre-Cedars main road to denounce the crime before eventually moving on and leaving the road clear.

- On the same date, some 40 individuals from Bcharre town went into Bcharre police station to check that [REDACTED] was in custody and then left for Bcharre Saray, where the security situation was extremely tense.
- In an immediate reaction to the crime, some of the town's young men deliberately entered the homes of Syrians living in Bcharre in order to attack them and throw them out onto the street. Some of them also set up positions on the Bcharre-Cedars main road and searched cars for Syrians, whom they showered with abuse and insults.
- A number of the town's youth beat up Syrian [REDACTED] in his home in the Seydat al-Nur district of Bcharre. He suffered bruises over his body and was taken to hospital by the Lebanese Red Cross for treatment. No allegations were made to the regional unit concerned.
- On 24 November 2020, two parliamentarians for the Bcharre district, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], issued a statement of condemnation in the wake of the crime.
- A meeting was organized at the home of [REDACTED] in Bcharre town and attended by a number of the town's dignitaries and mayors. The municipal council also met and a statement condemning the incident was issued.
- Following the crime, Bcharre municipality issued a statement in which it called on Syrians to leave the town. No related requests were referred to the security forces by the said municipality.
- Statements were furthermore issued by the parliamentarians, dignitaries and mayors of Bcharre in which they condemned the crime and called on inhabitants to reflect and avoid being drawn into acting on impulse, as the perpetrator had been detained by the Information Division.
- Concerning the role of security agencies on the date of the incident and the reactions of the townspeople in the immediate aftermath of the crime, a patrol from the Zgharta/Bcharre Information Bureau of the North Information Branch, which is attached to the Information Division at the Directorate-General of Internal Security Forces, came and arrested Syrian Muhammad Hasnu and handed him into the custody of Bcharre police station.
- As a security precaution and for fear of a reaction from the victim's family and the townspeople, the detainee was transferred away from the Bcharre area and handed into the custody of the North Information Division.
- For its part, the Lebanese Army took necessary measures to impose security and prevent attacks, stationing its units at the scene of the incident and taking on the task of protecting displaced persons. It did not tell those persons that they had to leave the town or vacate their places of residence.
- An investigation was conducted by Bcharre police station, as per report No. 310/302 of 23 November 2020, and at the instance of the Attorney General of the North Appeal Court, Justice Ghassan Basil, the detained Syrian's room was raided. A black Rotay 24 9mm military pistol with three usable bullets in the magazine was found inside the room, together with a crossbow of unknown make and manufacture, and a buckshot (or pellet) hunting rifle. These were seized by order of the judiciary.
- The Information Bureau of the North Information Division organized an investigation, as per report No. 302/302 of 23 November 2020, and the killer was arrested and handed into the custody of the Public Prosecution Office at the North Court of Appeal.
- On the same date, a patrol from the Incident Bureau and two district physicians, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], went to the scene of the crime and examined the body, after which it was taken by the Civil Defence to Bcharre Government Hospital.
- On 25 November 2020, an investigation was conducted by Bcharre police station, as per report No. 314/302, into a fire that had broken out in an apartment belonging to [REDACTED] – born to mother [REDACTED] in 1970 (registration No. 308) in the Bcharre/Saint John district – and occupied by a number of Syrian workers, who then left it after the murder. The fire caused material damage.

- An investigation was conducted by Cedars police station, as per report No. 48/302 of 27 November 2020, into an incident involving Syrian ██████████ – born to mother ██████████ in 1986 (registration No. 7) in Watiyah in the Syrian Arab Republic – who works in the Cedars vicinity and was beaten up by masked youths. He was taken by the Lebanese Red Cross to Bcharre Government Hospital for treatment and attended the police station on the same date. He had no wish to make any allegations against anyone and no wish to undergo a forensic medical examination.

- Immediately after the incident, the Lebanese Army and the Internal Security Forces carried out patrols to prevent citizens from gathering and protect Syrians from harassment, displacement or harm and secure their return to the Bcharre area.

- All inspections carried out by the security agencies were at the behest of the judiciary. The Lebanese Army patrolled by order of its leadership and searched the homes of Syrians for weapons.

- After the incident, and as part of organizing the Syrian workforce in the villages of the Jebbeh/Bcharre district, a meeting was held at the Centre of the Federation of Bcharre District Municipalities, at the invitation of the District Commissioner ██████████. The meeting was attended by the coordinator for Syrian displaced persons at the Ministry of the Interior and Municipalities, ██████████; the coordinator of the North, ██████████; the coordinator at the Ministry Social Affairs; the President of the Federation; heads of municipalities; the Chairperson of the League of District Mayors; and Bcharre town mayors. The District Commissioner stressed that preventive and legal measures were needed to regulate Syrian displacement and the irregular presence in places of residence and workplaces and to ensure that the law was not leniently applied.

- Monitoring and follow-up meetings were held by the Lebanese Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) team at the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of the Interior and Municipalities with the Bcharre District Commissioner, heads of municipalities in the district, town mayors, and security and military forces. Work was also coordinated with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (OHCHR) and civil society organizations.

Steps taken by the LCPR team at the Ministry of Social Affairs are as follows:

- Monitoring the trend in family displacement with partners working in the North;
- Following up and documenting all information about individual and community initiatives that have showed a willingness to secure accommodation;
- Meeting the mayor of Bcharre to follow up on the repercussions from the incident and request him to approve the return of affected families to collect their belongings and other items, together with their identity documents;
- Agreeing to regulate the presence of Syrian displaced persons in the district, provide basic needs and decent accommodation, keep statistics on displaced persons in the district, and identify the type of housing they should have;
- Ensuring that ministry representatives communicate with the district's municipalities to learn about Syrian families displaced to their towns from Bcharre and about the referral of such families to relevant partners for follow-up.

3. Facts of the Zouk Bhannine incident

- On 26 December 2020, personal disputes between Lebanese from the Zouk Bhannine area and Syrians developed into physical fights. A military weapon was fired into the air, the end result of which was that the camp for Syrian displaced persons was set alight. All the tents burned down and the numerous Syrians who suffered minor burns and asphyxiation were taken to hospitals in the area for treatment. The disturbances were the outcome of sudden disputes and mutual provocations between the two sides. No background, political or social causes were involved.

- The Lebanese Army secured necessary protection for the civil defence mechanisms that extinguished the fire. Its units also imposed security in the town, taking requisite measures and escorting the displaced to a safe location.

- The incident was investigated by the Minieh squad, as per report No. 3415/302 of 12 June 2020, and, at the instance of the competent judiciary, a fire investigator was commissioned to work with all security agencies to identify and arrest those who had started the disturbances and the fire.
- On 12 December 2020 and 7 January 2021, the Lebanese Army and the Internal Security Forces arrested a number of individuals suspected of taking part in the disturbances and setting the camp on fire and referred them to the competent judiciary.
- In cooperation with civil society associations and public figures as well as the Zakat Fund Committee in Minieh and the Zouk Bhannine municipality, inhabitants of the area provided in-kind assistance to those affected in the form of clothing, blankets, food, shelter and so on. The assistance was coordinated with OHCHR representatives.
- Immediately after the incident, statements condemning the destruction of the camp by fire were issued by virtually all political, partisan, religious and social groups and civil society figures, notably the member of parliament for the Minieh region, ██████████ ██████████ and the mayor of ██████████, both of whom directly oversaw the relief effort and the distribution of aid to affected persons.
- Most of those who had been living in the camp moved into nearby camps in the same town. To date, none of them has been subjected to any persecution or attacks.
- The camp was not rebuilt on the same property, in accordance with the wishes of the owner, who is intending to utilize it for himself.
- The LCRP team at the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of the Interior and Municipalities is still exploring with the Zouk Bhannine municipality the possibility of re-establishing the camp. It is a complex matter, however, and public figures in Minieh Dinnieh have concluded in conjunction with the municipality that such a possibility is unfeasible and should be avoided owing to conflict sensitivity, given that the camp was burned down as the result of the dispute with a neighbouring property owner and that the majority of affected families decided to move into rented housing rather than stay in a makeshift camp.
- Steps taken by the LCRP team at the Ministry of Social Affairs, were as follows:
 - Coordinating meetings with the municipality attended by representatives of relevant ministries and the OHCHR, public figures from the area and representatives of affected families;
 - Updating information from the field on aid distribution and supporting campaigns organized by local associations and individual initiatives;
 - Coordinating with the municipality and requesting it to catalogue the distribution of aid in the municipal building so as to organize the process and thus ensure that the aid or assistance is delivered to affected families;
 - Coordinating and facilitating the work of the Knights of Malta team with the municipality in performing medical examinations on all camp residents in the public park supervised by the municipality;
 - Taking the lead in monitoring the movement and end destination of affected families by keeping in more or less daily contact with the Molham organization, which has paid a full year's rent on the new housing for such families to ensure that they are accommodated and know where they will be living.

4. In summary:

- What happened in the two incidents in the towns of Bcharre and Zouk Bhannine was not the result of xenophobia towards those residing in Lebanese territory or of organized or premeditated action, especially given that Lebanon hosts hundreds of thousands of Palestinian, Syrian and Iraqi displaced persons on its territory in addition to tens of thousands of foreign workers.
- The violent reaction towards Syrian displaced persons in Bcharre was in fact the result of a criminal act and involved no pre-planned or organized attacks, particularly as an

estimated 300 of those persons returned to Bcharre after the situation had returned to normal.

- As to the incident in Zouk Bhannine town, it brought inhumane consequences but happened without warning as a result of personal disputes. It was quickly dealt with by those concerned and things returned to normal.

- The LCRP team at the Ministry of Social Affairs works proactively with ministries, local authorities and United Nations organizations, including the OHCHR and the United Nations Development Program, to prevent evictions where possible. or otherwise delay them, by finding practical solutions and alternatives for remedying the situation, taking into account the humanitarian circumstances. A contact group known as the Tension Task Force has been established to monitor conflict sensitivity indicators so that swift and effective action can be taken to protect Syrian displaced persons as necessary

- In working constantly to ensure the safety of all those residing on Lebanese soil, without distinction on the basis of religion, nationality or other status, the Lebanese Army has taken all necessary measures to provide continuous training on the substance of relevant instructions and imposes disciplinary and punitive measures if such instructions are disobeyed. Under the supervision of the OHCHR and other international and local governmental and non-governmental organizations, it also runs specialized training courses for Lebanese Army personnel in a variety of subjects, including trafficking in persons, combating torture, and protection for displaced persons and persons with special needs.

- All Lebanese civil, military and security authorities unfailingly take all measures to preserve the security and safety of non-nationals residing in its territory, especially refugees and displaced persons, despite the paucity of material resources available to them.
