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Lebanon: Local Institutions Must Lead the Recovery Effort

Almost one million persons in Lebanon were displaced during the 34-day conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in July and August 2006. Throughout the crisis, Lebanese institutions, civil society and citizens took the lead in responding to the humanitarian consequences of the violence.

Although most of the displaced have now returned home, needs remain, and local institutions, including Hezbollah, a recognized political party in Lebanon, are leading the response. As international agencies struggle to define their role in the reconstruction, it is essential that their reconstruction programs are adapted to meet local needs so as to maximize impact. While capacity is high within Lebanon, there is a need for an international presence to ensure that aid is adequately distributed and not politicized. The international community must coordinate closely with all national actors in order to avoid duplication and ensure that protection concerns are integrated in relief and reconstruction efforts.

Before the conflict erupted on July 12th, UN agencies and international NGOs had few international staff posted in Lebanon. Most of the international aid was focused on long-term development needs. As the crisis developed, many agencies began to rapidly expand their teams, deploying expatriate staff as well as importing equipment such as vehicles and telecommunications tools. The UN and international NGOs rapid reaction response was commendable, but the international response was poorly adapted to the realities of the Lebanese context.

Unlike many of the countries where international humanitarian agencies work, Lebanon is not a failed state. Lebanon has working government institutions, a sophisticated infrastructure and a very active civil society. The literacy rate is over 87 percent, and more than fifteen universities around the country offer multilingual training in many professional fields, including engineering, medicine and law. The Ministry of Social Affairs and the High Relief Commission were actively involved in the response – registering foreign NGOs, creating database of agencies, and calling meetings. The international community,

however, continued to adopt a ‘one size fits all’ approach to the Lebanese crisis.

Due to security concerns from headquarters, most UN agencies and their expatriate staff were unable to leave their residences and hotels and access displaced populations during the conflict. Meanwhile, Lebanese organizations and political groups were managing shelters, delivering aid, and even registering families with laminated registration cards. Rather than relying upon local capacity to avoid wasting scarce resources, agencies continued to deploy large numbers of expatriates and then worried about how to evacuate them should the crisis worsen.

As Lebanon moves into the reconstruction phase of the conflict, international agencies must change their approach and make use of Lebanon’s existing resources. Donors and the international community tend to look outside the country rather than inside when seeking solutions to problems. As the Lebanese economy was severely crippled by the ongoing conflict, there are many capable drivers, engineers, and other professionals currently seeking work. Relying on the national workforce would be much more cost efficient for organizations, while at the same time putting badly needed cash into the hands of Lebanese. Moreover, Refugees International noted that during the conflict, many trucks and cars were being shipped in from other countries. According to a Lebanese government official, “The UN has spent 30 million dollars to bring in trucks when Lebanon has plenty of trucks that were available for use. They could have just painted them in white instead of shipping them from abroad.”

Given the strong Lebanese capacity to manage many of the tasks that international agencies normally take on in crisis situations, the most appropriate role for external agencies is to focus on

putting protection into practice. Local organizations and political parties may have resources and organizational skills, but they do not have the humanitarian expertise necessary to ensure that protection principles are integrated into their activities. When RI visited shelters run by different political parties, we noted that almost all services were provided by men, who were either businessmen or political activists with no humanitarian training. As a result, women's particular needs and vulnerabilities were not necessarily addressed. However, the groups were happy to accept technical assistance and eager to show that they were trying to meet the needs of all. Local groups also generally lacked the expertise needed to identify gaps in assistance and reach out to the most vulnerable. As the initial emergency has ended and as the displaced are now returning home, the need to include a protection component in long-term recovery programs is more important than ever.

The central role played by Lebanese political parties, such as Hezbollah or the Aounist movement, in the relief and reconstruction efforts raises fears of aid being politicized and distributed to serve a political agenda rather than to meet the needs of the most vulnerable. Despite the government of Lebanon's efforts to undertake a greater role in providing humanitarian assistance to the affected communities, the government is still quite young, fragile, and mistrusted by many Lebanese.

Hezbollah remains the primary actor in the relief and reconstruction effort. While RI was not able to document direct discrimination in the distribution of aid, we did see many manifestations of fear of discrimination. After the cease-fire, RI interviewed a family of displaced Christians from the village of Marjayoun in south Lebanon living in Beirut. When asked whether they had received the financial assistance distributed by Hezbollah to those whose homes were destroyed, they told us "Hezbollah will only take care of the Shia Muslims. There is no sense in us even asking for their assistance." As a result, this family and many others were reluctant to return, fearing that no one would be available to assist them. Another Christian family living in a mixed village near Tyre told RI, "Hezbollah might help us but we would be very, very far at the bottom of the list. They will help their own first." The fear of discrimination is almost as damaging as actual discrimination because it keeps people from returning home or asking for assistance.

Despite the political difficulties and the constraints imposed by donors, the UN and international humanitarian agencies must coordinate their efforts with all actors currently working in Lebanon, including Hezbollah. Coordination will ensure that gaps in assistance will be identified and will help foster an overall aid environment that abides by the core principles of humanitarian action, which include independence and impartiality. Coordination with the government of Lebanon and other active organizations

will allow international agencies to monitor all assistance efforts and identify their concerns to service providers. Information sharing is essential to avoid the duplication of efforts and identify vulnerable groups that the aid effort is neglecting.

Refugees International is deeply concerned about the passivity of the initial UN response and the lack of pro-activeness in approaching local actors, including the Lebanese government. This led to a duplication of efforts, such as the simultaneous creation of humanitarian databases by both OCHA and the Lebanese government. More coordination would have also enabled the international community to have more information about the state of displacement and to ensure that protection principles were taken into account by all. While the UNHCR-led protection cluster meetings were theoretically open to all, the UN initially made very little effort to ensure the participation of local government and civil society representatives. Although the situation has improved significantly, Refugees International urges the UN to continue working on enhanced cooperation with Lebanese institutions and to maintain a dialogue with all actors, including Hezbollah.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ UN and international non-governmental agencies focus their resources on filling gaps in response to needs in Lebanon rather than deploying costly expatriate staff and importing materials that are readily available in Lebanon;
- ❑ All UN and international agencies work closely with the government of Lebanon to coordinate their efforts. Lebanon is not a failed state and the government must lead all relief and reconstruction efforts;
- ❑ UNHCR as the protection cluster lead ensure that protection is incorporated in recovery programs by reaching out to local groups, including the Lebanese government, political groups and Lebanese civil society, and work with them to raise awareness about and incorporate protection in all sectors;
- ❑ UNHCR work with all actors to identify the minority groups particularly vulnerable to discrimination and ensure they receive adequate attention;
- ❑ Donor governments take Hezbollah's role into consideration and ensure that the restrictions they impose on the agencies they fund do not impede them from liaising with Hezbollah to avoid duplication of aid, ensure coordination of efforts and identify vulnerable groups.

Advocates Kristele Younes and Sarah Martin assessed the humanitarian situation in Lebanon in August.