

Lebanon Says World Must Shoulder Syrian Refugee Burden

President **Michel Suleiman** called on Monday for international action to help Lebanon cope with a deluge of refugees from the war in neighboring **Syria**, which he said threatened to set his volatile country ablaze.

In an interview with Reuters at the presidential palace overlooking Beirut—and just 25 miles from the Syrian-Lebanese border—Suleiman compared Syria's **civil war** to a conflagration breaking out next door.

"When there is a fire next to your house, you have to assume that it will spread and you have to try to stop it reaching you," said Suleiman, a former army chief elected president as part of a peace deal to end sectarian clashes in Beirut in 2008.

Suleiman said the presence of a million **Syrians** alongside an existing Palestinian refugee population meant that a quarter of his tiny Mediterranean nation's population were now refugees.

"Those numbers are more than the capacity of any country to bear," he said. "It's not just a matter of material help and relief—the geographic and demographic capacity is saturated and the problems resulting from this massive number affect us socially, economically and on security."

Lebanon says it is now hosting 1 million Syrians, one third of them officially registered as **refugees** fleeing a conflict which has killed 70,000 people, according to the United Nations. The remainder are mostly guest workers and their families.

They live among a nation of 4 million, a quarter of the size

of Switzerland, which fought a devastating 1975-1990 civil war and whose sectarian faultlines between Christians, Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims have been exacerbated by the fighting in Syria.

Suleiman called for an international conference to find ways for other countries to absorb the refugees, along the lines of a 1979 Geneva Convention in which Western nations agreed to settle tens of thousands of "boat people" who fled the war in Vietnam.

"The world should think about how to alleviate this burden from Lebanon ... For humanitarian reasons we cannot turn back any refugee who is hungry, wounded, frightened or persecuted," he said. "But what to do if there is an epidemic or hunger?"

"The Syrian refugees should be distributed (to other countries)," said Suleiman, adding that Lebanon would never close its border to Syrian refugees.

Danger to Lebanon

Sporadic violence has shaken Lebanon since the Syrian uprising erupted nearly two years ago.

Dozens of people have been killed in street fighting in the northern city of Tripoli between a Sunni Muslim majority—which strongly supports the Syrian rebels battling President Bashar al-Assad—and a minority from Assad's own Alawite sect.

In October a top security official, whose investigations had implicated Syrian authorities in an alleged plot to set off explosives in Lebanon, was killed by a Beirut car bomb. The assassination triggered Sunni protests across the country.

"There is a danger. We have to keep extinguishing the fire," said Suleiman, a Maronite Christian. "The fire extinguisher should always be in our hands."

"There is an ongoing war, but Syria won't be divided or partitioned. It would be a catastrophe for all the region, but it won't happen," the Lebanese leader said, calling for a

concerted push by world powers to end the crisis.

“They should find a political solution. It is imperative that they have an international conference because the damage of what is happening will not be confined to Syria, but will hurt all major powers.

“Europe, Russia and the United States and major powers should agree on a solution and should impose it on Arabs and on the Syrians,” he declared.

International divisions have paralyzed U.N. Security Council action to halt the Syrian conflict. Russia and China have blocked three resolutions backed by Western and some Arab states aimed at putting pressure on Assad to stop the bloodshed.

“I am very worried about the situation,” Suleiman said. “We are working to prevent the explosion. Nobody has any excuse to avoid their responsibilities.

“Those who benefit from the existing situation have no right to subject the country to a problem,” he said, apparently referring to Syria’s local partisans including Hezbollah and its allies, who dominate Prime Minister Najib Mikati’s government.

Queried on how long he believed Assad could stay in power, the 64-year-old Suleiman was circumspect. Asked if it could be years, he said, “Maybe. We have experience about this kind of crisis which lasted for many years,” referring to the 1975-90 civil war.

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