

The Truth About Refugees' Lives

WWM has an occasional diary from a church leader still in Aleppo, the Syrian city that's now a key battleground between rebels and President Assad's forces. Recently, however, Pastor Samuel* visited Beirut in neighboring Lebanon to meet some of that country's 1 million Syrian refugees. This is his edited account:

Beirut is one of the most expensive cities in the world; whenever I visit, I make it one of my duties to meet with Syrian refugees, especially families who left Aleppo. It is not easy meeting them when I know they've had to leave behind a decent life where they had jobs, owned their own apartments, and were serving in the church and their communities.

Now, most of them say things like "Pastor, look at us. See where we are now and how we lived before. Will we ever live again in golden days?" Many have shared sentiments such as "the best solution is to leave the region. Leave and forget these countries; leave the Middle East and live a decent life in Europe." They feel they have had enough suffering.

During my time with the refugees in Beirut, I heard stories of how poorly they're being treated.

Beirut Rents Doubled for Syrian Refugees

Unfortunately, many Lebanese view Syrians as second-class citizens and have not welcomed them. The refugees I met rent small one- or two-bedroom apartments, for which they pay almost double the rent paid by locals. They're being taken advantage of.

Syrians who've been fortunate enough to find work often work long hours for little pay. I've heard that even some Lebanese

Christians seem to be encouraging this injustice.

I met a young university accountancy graduate. He told me: "For days and days I searched for work. Most employers said they had nothing for me, but I kept on searching and finally found a job in a shop selling metal. One day I was ill and had to stay at home in bed. When I called my boss to say I could not come, he just said that I should try to find another job." He's now depressed because of the humiliation. Plus, he worked a 10-hour day for half a normal Lebanese salary.

Integration problems

More than a million Syrians live in Lebanon as refugees; some there for almost four years. Integration is a big problem, according to several I spoke to, even though they share the same language and there are historical and family ties.

Some Lebanese accuse Syrians of many things: "Your Syrian government ruled our country for more than 25 years, now it's your turn to feel what that's like."

"We in Lebanon were jobless. Now, you have come here and are taking our jobs. You're doing every kind of work for at least half the salary."

"Every item in the market is very expensive because of you Syrians."

A 15-year-old student told me: "During one of my Geography classes, the teacher talked about the water issue in Lebanon. He showed us the rivers of Lebanon on the map, and told us about the richness of the country because of the mineral water. But then he said that because of the Syrian refugees the country now has a shortage of drinking water. The students turned their heads towards us Syrians, and looked at me as if I was the one causing the shortage."

Lebanese Law Bans Casual Work for Refugees

The Lebanese government issued a law earlier this year that prevents Syrians entering Lebanon as refugees unless they have special status, are officially invited by a Lebanese organization, or by a Lebanese citizen prepared to pay their taxes. Syrians are no longer allowed to have an official job in Lebanon, which means they can't hold a work permit.

Syrians need to keep renewing their visa to stay in Lebanon, which means paying a lot of money. When they renew their rental contract every couple of months they usually find their landlord has put the costs up.

These challenges and complicated laws make Syrians want to leave the country, which many try to do legally by getting a visa. They are not easy to get, so many try to leave Lebanon illegally by paying human traffickers to reach Europe.

According to the U.N., the number of registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon has started to diminish from official figures of more than 1.1 million.

Many Syrians face problems when they need medical care in Lebanon. Medicine and hospitalization are expensive. The government subsidizes these costs for Lebanese citizens, but Syrians have to buy costly health insurance or pay cash.

Many Syrians who fled the war lost almost everything and are unable to pay for health insurance. I met several people willing to risk travelling back into Syria, to places like Latakia, where medical treatment is cheaper than in Lebanon.

One lady told me with tears in her eyes how, on the road back to Syria to receive treatment, she was wounded by a bomb blast. "What a life we have now," she said "as if we were born to suffer. What kind of life is this? Sometimes I think dying is much better than living. The ones who've died have rest now, and no suffering and pain."

Barriers to Education

The school system in Lebanon is different from Syria, not only because of the curriculum but also the language, and students need to work hard to fit in. However the biggest problem is fees. I met several families whose children were not going to school because they can't pay the fees or even buy books. Many children now work to help bring their family an income.

"What can we do?" a mother asked me. "The first year, some organizations helped us, but now, in our fourth year, people are tired of helping us. It is better for my children to find a job and start work at an early age." I worry about these children—what will happen to them after missing several years of education? What will happen to them in the future?

Facing an Exodus

When I met refugees in Lebanon some years ago, most of them said that they were expecting the war to end within a couple of weeks or months and that they would be able to return to their homes and jobs. But the war has continued for 4 1/2 years now, and there's still no end in sight. Because of the challenges they face in Lebanon, most of them are now doing their best to find a way to leave the country with no plans to return.

Families wait for some kind of miracle from Western embassies that will get them into Europe. Because Christian families will not live in refugee camps, their chances of getting to Europe with the help of the U.N. are very small, and their only option is to use smugglers.

I met a widow who's been living for two years with her son and two other families in two small bedrooms. Imagine 11 people living in two bedrooms. When I asked about her son, tears came to her eyes: "Both of us worked for three years and we lived with two families in a small apartment. We found out that living in Beirut had no meaning and that the war is only

continuing. We tried to find a way to reach Europe, but we couldn't get a visa. Then we collected all that we had and gave it to the smugglers. My son went from Beirut to Izmir in Turkey and then from Turkey on a boat to Greece and then, after several weeks, he managed to reach Germany. Thank God he survived. Now he is in Germany and arranging all the papers; I hope that I will be able to join him at some point."

I asked why she didn't go with him. "The money we collected didn't cover the cost of two people so we decided just to send him. I can wait and suffer for another year in order to join him."

*not his real name, changed for his protection