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Lebanon: New entry requirements for Syrians likely to block would-be refugees

New requirements imposed by the Lebanese authorities which may restrict access for people desperate to flee Syria is yet another stark reminder that the international community must do much more to assist.

To its considerable credit, Lebanon already hosts more than 1.2 million refugees from Syria – equal to about a quarter of its population before the Syrian crisis began. As the crisis nears its fifth year, Lebanon and other countries in the region which host the majority of Syria's refugees are struggling to cope.

Lebanon and Syria's other neighbours are struggling to cope with the millions of refugees who have fled the increasingly dire situation since the crisis and conflict began.

The international community must do much more to resettle refugees and share the burden in the face of one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent history. According to the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, approximately 10% of refugees in the main host countries need resettlement. However, to date less than 2% have been offered resettlement places.

As of 5 January 2015 a visa is required to enter Lebanon from Syria, a major change from relatively unrestricted border crossing between the two countries in the past.

The regulations, issued on 31 December 2014, provide a list of six types of visa categories, one of which Syrians wishing to enter Lebanon must obtain to enter the country. The categories include tourism, education, medical treatment and business. All require specified documents, including proof of hotel bookings for tourists, and appointments for those seeking medical treatment, in order to meet the requirements and have their visa approved by the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Interior before being allowed entry into Lebanon.

According to Lebanon's General Security Office, which issued the decree, exceptions will be made for humanitarian cases in coordination with the UN

Refugee Agency, UNHCR. However authorities are still working to specify the criteria for such cases to be allowed in to Lebanon. A reported statement from the Ministry of Social Affairs that 'extreme humanitarian cases' would still be granted entrance to the country underlines concerns that many would-be refugees may be denied access to safety in Lebanon.

Refugees already in Lebanon that were registered with UNHCR prior to 5 January will be able to renew their residency permits every six months for a fee of \$200 USD. Many refugees are likely not to be able to afford these fees and Amnesty International calls on the government of Lebanon to abolish them. Those that are not registered with UNHCR however are required to apply for visas under the new regulations and will need to present the necessary documents. All those wishing to work in Lebanon are required to have a Lebanese sponsor.

While recognizing the strain Lebanon and other countries in the region are under in hosting an unprecedented number of refugees, Amnesty International strongly encourages all countries that have imposed restrictions on those fleeing the brutal conflict in Syria to immediately lift them.

Due to the on-going and widespread human rights violations, war crimes, and crimes against humanity committed in Syria, Amnesty International considers all asylum-seekers from Syria to be in need of international protection. Forcing anyone to return to Syria would in almost all cases amount to a violation of the principle of non-refoulement in violation of international law.

Amnesty International urges the international community to step up support to Lebanon and other countries in the region through increased resettlement places and humanitarian funding.

Amnesty International is calling for 380,000 of Syria's most vulnerable refugees in Lebanon and other host countries to be resettled by the end of 2016. These include refugees who are in need of urgent medical care, survivors of torture and children at risk, among others, in accordance with UNHCR's vulnerability criteria. To date only 5% of Syria's refugee population has sought asylum in countries outside of the region.

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