



General Assembly

Distr.: General
15 February 2019

English only

Human Rights Council

Fortieth session

25 February–22 March 2019

Agenda item 4

Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[8 February 2019]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



Palestinians from the Syrian Arab Republic in Egypt

As the bloody warfare in the Syrian Arab Republic (hereinafter referred to as Syria) continued to take away the lives of innocent civilians without mercy since March 2011, thousands of Palestinian refugees fled the war-torn country in the search for a safe shelter. The Arabic Republic of Egypt (hereinafter referred to as Egypt) was one such destination.

According to unofficial data, an estimated 3,000 Palestinians from Syria fled to Egypt. They have sought shelter in such cities as Cairo, Alexandria, Damietta, the Eastern Province, and Giza. At the same time, 500 refugees illegally crossed the Sudanese-Egyptian borders.

Palestinians from Syria in Egypt: Torn Between the Reluctance of UNHCR and the Apathy of UNRWA

Palestinian refugees from Syria in Egypt have been deprived of much-needed assistance by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on account that they fall outside of the agency's mandate. The absence of relief services by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has made the situation far worse. The refugee agency has maintained that Egypt falls outside of its recognized map of field operations.

As a result, Palestinians from Syria in Egypt have been treated as foreigners rather than legitimate asylum-seekers fleeing war zones. They have, thus, been denied the right to legal visas, refugee documents, safe accommodation, basic services, relief assistance, free education, healthcare, and access to the local labor market.

Legal Status

The Egyptian authorities continue to categorize Palestinians of Syria as "tourists" and, thus, denying them the right to an unequivocal legal status. Refugees have been shorn of the right to legal stays in the country. Red tape for legal visas often takes long months to be finalized. Torn between non-recognition and mistreatment, Palestinian refugees have been trapped in a precarious situation.

Those who entered the country through illegal routes, by creeping into the Sudanese borders, have been deprived of the right of free movement and access to vital services. The Egyptian authorities have not only barred their access out of the country through recognized airports and seaports, but have also rebuffed their appeals for legal documents.

Education

Palestinian children from Syria have been denied easy access to education facilities in Egypt. The refugees receive basic and secondary school education at government-run schools after a formal consent is issued to that end by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor and the Ministry of Education.

Unlike Syrian nationals who have been exempted from paying education charges, Palestinian refugees are compelled to pay in dollars given their "tourist" status. Owing to the complicated administrative procedures at government institutions, the only option left for the Palestinians of Syria is to have their children join private schools, an alternative which far outlive their budgets. Several refugees found no other option than to register at Azhari schools, despite their complicated curricula and the extremely low chances of success.

Healthcare

A number of Palestinian refugees from Syria have benefited from basic health services provided by UNRWA and the Egyptian Red Crescent. Such services include surgeries at Mustafa Mahmoud Hospital in Cairo. A patient is also entitled to a daily coupon of 200

Egyptian pounds to purchase medicines. Those diagnosed with chronic illnesses receive a monthly allowance of 900 Egyptian pounds. The refugees have, however, been denied free dental healthcare services, among other much-needed wellness programs.

Living conditions

Palestinian refugees from Syria have been grappling with an abject socio-economic situation as a result of their lack of access to the local labor market and to legal residency. A refugee receives a monthly sum of no more than 400 Egyptian Pounds (\$22), transferred through a magnetic stripe card.

In-kind items worth 1,200 Egyptian Pounds are also handed over to the refugees by the German Red Cross on a quarterly basis. Scores of impoverished refugees sell the swipe cards to traders at prices that are 20% less than their estimated value, in an attempt to secure urgent life-saving services and items for their starved families.

A number of Palestinian refugees from Syria are deprived of relief aids provided by UN bodies and humanitarian charities in the country.

Recommendations:

- The Egyptian government should treat the Palestinians of Syria as Syrian asylum-seekers and grant them their basic human rights.
 - Palestinians from Syria in Egypt, particularly those who entered the country via illegal routes, should be granted a non-ambivalent legal status and legal visas in order to smooth their access to vital facilities, including public schools and hospitals.
 - UNRWA should live up to its missions as regards the Palestinians of Syria in Egypt and provide them with the cash and in-kind aid urgently needed at such a critical stage.
 - Serious steps should be made by UNRWA's Liaison Office in Egypt in cooperation with UNHCR to secure education services and relief assistance and also issue the asylum cards needed to enhance the refugees' legal status and endure their fair treatment by the Egyptian authorities.
 - The UN bodies should take all necessary measures to put into effect the protection protocol referred to by the 1951 Refugee Convention, which outlines the rights of the displaced as well as the legal obligations of the host states to protect them physically, legally, and morally.
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