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country summary

Lebanon

Lebanon endured another year of instability in 2007, with political and security crises weakening state institutions and undermining human rights. The three-month military confrontation between the Lebanese armed forces and the armed Islamist group Fatah al-Islam destroyed most of the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp. More than 40 civilians died in the fighting.

As the security situation deteriorated, torture and ill-treatment of security suspects increased. Palestinian refugees continue to face widespread discrimination, and their situation worsened following the Nahr al-Bared fighting. Iraqis fleeing their war-torn country to Lebanon find themselves facing a real risk of coerced return. Lebanese law continues to discriminate against women by, among other things, denying them the right to pass their nationality to their children or spouses. Migrant domestic workers face exploitation and abuse from their employers with little possibility for legal remedy.

In May 2007 the UN Security Council passed a resolution to establish an international tribunal to try those responsible for the murder of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005. Access to redress remains elusive for the approximately 900 civilians who died in last year's war between Israel and Hezbollah and for the families of the estimated 17,000 who "disappeared" during and after Lebanon's deadly civil war (1975-1990).

The Nahr al-Bared Battle and Palestinian Refugees

The battle between the Lebanese army and the armed Islamist Fatah al-Islam from May to September 2007 in the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp was the worst internal fighting since the end of the civil war in 1990. Over 30,000 camp residents left the camp, which lay in ruins. According to military and government sources, the battle resulted in the deaths of 166 Lebanese army soldiers, 220 Fatah al-Islam

militants, and at least 40 civilians, most of whom were Palestinians. The Lebanese government appealed to international donors for almost US\$400 million to rebuild the camp and its surrounding areas and to care for those forced out of their homes.

The Lebanese army and internal security forces arbitrarily detained and physically abused some Palestinian men fleeing the fighting. On June 29, 2007, the Lebanese army killed two Palestinian civilians when it opened fire on demonstrators demanding to return to their homes in Nahr al-Bared. The government failed to investigate the cases of arbitrary detention and abuse or the shooting incident, reinforcing a climate of impunity.

The fighting exacerbated existing tensions between Lebanese and an estimated 300,000 Palestinians living in Lebanon. Harassment and abuse of Palestinian civilians at checkpoints on account of their identity discouraged some Palestinians from moving around the country. Palestinians remain subject to wide-ranging restrictions on housing and work despite some efforts by the authorities to relax some of these restrictions in 2005.

Torture and Ill-Treatment

As the security situation deteriorated in 2007, reports of torture and ill-treatment of security detainees increased. While the exact scope of torture remains unknown, credible reports indicate that the Military Intelligence unit of the Ministry of Defense, the Information Branch of the Internal Security Forces, and the police—notably in their anti-drug trafficking operations—engage in torture of certain detainees.

Lebanese law prohibits torture, but accountability for ill-treatment and torture in detention remains elusive. In a rare exception, in March 2007, a Lebanese court sentenced a policeman for torturing an Egyptian man, but the 15-day sentence and the monetary fine were insignificant penalties.

Conditions in prison and detention facilities remain poor, with overcrowding a perennial problem. At least five people died in custody in 2007 without independent investigations to credibly determine their exact cause of death.

Legacy of War between Hezbollah and Israel

More than a year after the end of the war between Israel and Hezbollah, neither the Israeli nor the Lebanese governments have investigated the serious violations of the laws of war committed by the warring parties. The war resulted in approximately 900 civilian deaths in Lebanon and 39 civilian deaths in Israel.

The estimated one million cluster submunition “duds” left behind by Israel’s bombing campaign continue to kill and injure civilians, resulting, at this writing, in at least 34 deaths and 216 injuries. Israel continues its refusal to turn over detailed information on the location of its cluster munition attacks, hampering demining efforts, which the United Nations estimates will last until the end of 2008.

The reconstruction of the infrastructure and of the tens of thousands of homes damaged by Israeli attacks has stalled amidst allegations of corruption and rising tensions between the government and Hezbollah.

In October 2007 Israel and Hezbollah agreed to exchange the remains of an Israeli civilian who had drowned and whose body had washed ashore in Lebanon for a captive Hezbollah member and the bodies of two of the group’s fighters. The two Israeli soldiers abducted by Hezbollah at the beginning of the July 2006 war remained in captivity at this writing.

Political Assassinations, Hariri Tribunal, and Lack of Accountability

The targeting of politicians continued in 2007, with two separate explosions killing pro-government parliamentarians Walid Eido and Antoine Ghanem in June and September respectively. The UN-appointed International Independent Investigation Commission continues its investigations into the killing of former Prime Minister Hariri in 2005 and other politically motivated assassinations, but it has not named any official suspects.

In June 2007 Security Council Resolution 1757 established a tribunal to try those responsible for the Hariri killing, and the UN began the process of setting up the tribunal. Four former heads of Lebanese intelligence and security services—General `Ali al-Hajj, General Raymond Azar, Brigadier General Jamil al-Sayyed, and Mustafa

Hamdan—remain in detention without charge following their arrest in August 2005 on suspicion of their involvement in Hariri's assassination.

“Disappearances”

No progress was made in 2007 to uncover the fate of the Lebanese, Palestinians, and other nationals who “disappeared” during and after the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war. The Lebanese government estimates that there were a total of 17,415 such cases, but no criminal investigations or prosecutions have ever been initiated. Relatives and friends of the “disappeared” have been holding a sit-in in front of the UN offices in Beirut since April 2005 to demand information on the fate of people still unaccounted for.

According to Lebanese human rights groups, Syria has committed at least 640 enforced disappearances, detaining Lebanese incommunicado in Syrian prisons. An official joint Syrian-Lebanese committee established in May 2005 to investigate the cases had not published any findings at this writing.

Iraqi Refugees

An estimated 50,000 Iraqis are now living in Lebanon. Since January 2007, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has recognized all Iraqis from central and southern Iraq seeking asylum in Lebanon as refugees on a prima facie basis. However, Lebanon has refused to give legal effect to UNHCR's recognition of Iraqi refugees, and it treats the vast majority of them as illegal immigrants, subjecting a number of them to arrest, fines, indefinite detention, and coerced return. Lebanon provides almost no services to the Iraqis and no effective process for regularizing their status.

Human Rights Defenders

Human rights groups operate freely in Lebanon, but the tense political and security situation creates a challenging environment for activists. In September 2007 judicial police formally questioned a Human Rights Watch researcher with respect to a legal complaint accusing him of “weakening national sentiment” and other such crimes in connection with the release of a report by Human Rights Watch documenting

Hezbollah violations in their rocket attacks on Israel. The prosecutor did not proceed with the case for lack of evidence to prove the elements of the crime.

Samira Trad, whose organization Frontiers Center promotes the rights of refugees, continues to face ill-defined defamation charges dating from 2003, apparently related to her work on behalf of refugees. Her court session is scheduled for January 2008.

Discrimination against Women

Despite women's active participation in all aspects of Lebanese society, discriminatory provisions continue to exist in personal status laws, nationality laws, and criminal laws relating to violence in the family. Current Lebanese law does not allow Lebanese women to confer nationality on either their spouses or children.

Women migrants employed as domestic workers, most of whom come from Sri Lanka, face exploitation and abuse by employers, including excessive hours of work, nonpayment of wages, and restrictions on their liberty. Many women migrants suffer physical and sexual abuse at the hands of employers, in a climate of complete impunity for employers. According to media reports, over 200 migrant domestic workers in Lebanon reportedly committed suicide over the last four years with no real investigation of their deaths.

Key International Actors

Multiple international actors compete for influence in Lebanon, but none contribute effectively to improving Lebanon's human rights record.

Since the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006, 13,000 UN peacekeepers monitor Lebanon's southern border and its territorial waters. The UN Security Council passed Resolution 1757 in May 2007 to establish an international tribunal to try those responsible for the Hariri killing. Meanwhile, the Security Council continues to follow-up on the implementation of Resolution 1559, which calls among other things for the Lebanese government to extend its control over all Lebanese territory and the "disarmament of all Lebanese militias."

France and the United States retain a strong role in Lebanon. In 2007, the US sharply increased its military assistance to Lebanon to US\$270 million, more than five times the amount it provided a year earlier.

Regionally, Syria, Iran, and Saudi Arabia maintain a strong influence on Lebanese politics through their local allies. Despite the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in April 2005, Lebanese-Syrian relations remain tense, and members of the parliamentary majority accuse Syria of killing some of its members. As Hezbollah's main foreign ally, Iran is seen by many as key to any long-term solution to the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel.