Lebanon and the United Nations: together in achieving common goals!

The last few weeks have seen a renewed public debate about refugee returns. As Lebanon struggles to grapple with its complex economic and political challenges, the United Nations’ role in the return of Syrian refugees has become entangled with the internal debate on how to handle the large refugee population in Lebanon, and prospects for their return to Syria.

The United Nations and the Government of Lebanon share the same common strategic objective of supporting peace and stability in Lebanon by addressing security, economic, humanitarian and social challenges. We are grateful for the generosity expressed by Lebanon and the Lebanese since the beginning of the conflict in Syria. The international community has much to learn from the Lebanese, who have themselves experienced displacement and uprooting over the last few decades. This is why it is so important to continue supporting Lebanon at a time when it is facing multiple challenges.

Since the beginning of the crisis, we have built a close partnership with the Government in order to achieve these common goals. The three major conferences organized this year in Rome, Paris and Brussels are a clear signal that the international community’s commitment to Lebanon remain stronger than ever.

The United Nations’ goal is to help find long-term solutions for refugees, whether this means safely returning to Syria or leaving Lebanon to resettle to third countries. We have always been clear that the future of refugees is not in Lebanon, in line with the Government’s clear position.

While recognizing the intense pressure on Lebanon, it is also important to acknowledge that the situation in Syria is extremely complex and that for many refugee families, returning is currently not an option. It is therefore essential for all of us to work together to ensure that no refugee is coerced to return prematurely to a situation where they can be harmed, or forced to flee again. The Government of Lebanon does not say anything different since it has consistently expressed its commitment to the principle of “non-refoulement”.

The United Nations will continue to play a critical role with regional partners and relevant authorities in Syria to create the conditions that will allow the vast majority to return in safety and dignity. Meanwhile, it is our duty to respect refugees’ individual decisions. It is their right, and it would be inconceivable for the United Nations to oppose a refugee’s decision about their own future.

The Lebanese understand the complex conditions of war. When people are uprooted from their homes, it means putting their lives – and that of their children – on hold. So it is even more important for them to have the right information to make an informed decision to increase the chance of a successful and definitive return.
Exploring and understanding the priorities of refugees and listening to their concerns when they make their decision will help remove the obstacles for return.

This is why UNHCR talks to refugees, to ensure they have answers to any questions they may have before leaving and to make sure they have the right documents to reestablish their life back home, and access schools and essential services such as healthcare once they are back. It is one of the most important ways for us to ensure that returns are sustainable.

As the debate on refugee returns gains momentum, we now stand at an important crossroad. More than ever, it is essential that the United Nations and the Government of Lebanon work together in a spirit of full partnership to address critical challenges. It is our collective responsibility to promote sustainable returns and to preserve the stability and the Lebanese model of diversity and tolerance.

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