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Lebanon: Fears for thousands of refugees caught up in intense fighting

Amnesty International is greatly concerned about several thousand civilians who remain trapped in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp, near Tripoli in northern Lebanon.

The civilians, long-term Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, are being exposed to grave risk amid continuing fighting between members of the Fatah al-Islam armed group and the Lebanese Army soldiers who surround the camp.

Most of the camp's 30,000 residents fled during a lull in the fighting last week, but according to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) between 3,000 and 5,000 remain. They are believed to include hundreds of elderly, disabled and children who were unable or unwilling to leave. They are at risk, not only from the continuing fighting, but lack of food, water and power supplies, and access to medical care: there is only one doctor, a general practitioner, remaining inside the camp. One of the people Amnesty International spoke to, a civilian named Milad who remains in the camp, appealed on 2 June for urgent medical supplies, particularly for people with diabetes, heart complaints and nervous complaints.

At least 27 civilians have been killed, in addition to 44 Lebanese Army soldiers and tens of Fatah al-Islam fighters. The camp has been subject to prolonged and intense artillery shelling – which appears at times to have been indiscriminate.

On 22 May, during a temporary cease-fire, an UNRWA relief convoy was struck as it entered Nahr al-Bared camp, killing at least two civilians and injuring at least 10 others when, according to UNRWA, thousands of Palestinian refugees gathered around aid trucks to obtain food, medicine and water. On the same day, a minibus carrying some 20 civilians and fleeing Nahr al-Bared camp southwards, was hit by bullets as it approached a Lebanese Army checkpoint. The driver, Nayf Selah Selah, and one pregnant woman, Munha Abu Radi, were killed.

Hundreds of homes, several mosques, a large water storage tank, the cemetery and other civilian properties, including, reportedly, two shelters, have been badly damaged. Members of the Gheneym family, who are secondarily displaced with 20,000 other Nahr al-Bared residents, told Amnesty International last week that for several days before they fled they were sharing, on average, about 10 slices of unleavened Arabic bread daily, between 80 people.

As the conflict continues, clashes also erupted overnight on 3 June in Ein al-Hilweh camp near Sidon, south Lebanon, between the Lebanese Army and Jund al-Sham militants who have links with Fatah al-Islam. According to news reports two soldiers and two members of Jund al-Sham were killed and at least two civilians were said to have been injured during the fighting.

According to the Lebanese Army, Fatah al-Islam has fired grenades from a mosque. The Army says they have not returned fire.

Amnesty International urges all parties involved, and those who have influence over them, to exert all efforts to minimise risks to civilians. The organization calls on both sides to ensure the protection of civilians inside the camp. All measures must be taken to ensure civilians are able to safely evacuate the camp if they wish. International humanitarian agencies should be permitted to assist those remaining in the camp and to aid those wishing to leave. Each party to the conflict must ensure the safety and security of civilians.