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Lebanon: Amid reports of harassment at army checkpoints, continuing concern for civilians affected by fighting at Palestinian refugee camp

Amnesty International has written to Lebanon's Defence Minister to express its continuing concern over the plight of several thousand Palestinian civilians who remain trapped in Nahr al-Bared refugee camp near Tripoli due to fighting between the Lebanese army and members of Fatah al-Islam, an Islamist armed group. The organization also expressed concern about reports that Palestinian civilians have been harassed and abused by Lebanese army soldiers manning security checkpoints, and called for these and other incidents to be investigated.

More than 130 people are reported to have been killed since fighting broke out between Fatah al-Islam, whose members had established armed positions within the refugee camp and thereby put the security of the local population at risk, and the Lebanese army on 20 May. At least 27 civilians and 60 Lebanese army soldiers have been killed. In the first few days the camp was subjected to prolonged and intense artillery shelling from the Lebanese armed forces, which appeared at times to have been indiscriminate. Thousands of some 30,000 camp residents were able to flee from the camp during an arranged truce on 22 May and small groups have continued to be evacuated since with the help of the Palestinian and Lebanese Red Cross / Crescent and the International Red Cross. Difficulties in leaving the camp were highlighted yesterday when two Lebanese Red Cross workers were killed at the northern edge of the camp. Most of some 25,000 displaced civilians are now sheltering at al-Beddaawi, another Palestinian refugee camp about 15 kilometres away which Amnesty International delegates visited last week, where there is now massive overcrowding and the recently displaced live in schools, empty shops, abandoned buildings and in houses of the local refugee population.

Three weeks after the fighting commenced, several thousand civilians are still believed to remain in Nahr al-Bared, fearful or unable to leave their homes. Conditions for civilians are reported to be dire, with water and electricity supplies cut off and very little food and water now entering the camp. Meanwhile, fighting continues between the remaining members of Fatah al-Islam and Lebanese army forces who surround the camp and continue to use artillery and other heavy weaponry against the insurgents.

In its letter to Defence Minister Elias al-Murr, Amnesty International called for the army to take all possible steps to enable the remaining civilians safely to evacuate from Nahr al-Bared and to ensure the safety of any civilians who choose to remain in the camp. It also urged the authorities to investigate two incidents on 22 May in which civilian vehicles appear to have been targeted. In one incident, two people were killed and several others injured when a convoy belonging to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) which was distributing relief supplies inside the camp, was hit by at least one explosive device. In the second incident, a bus driver and a pregnant woman were shot dead as their bus approached an army checkpoint, and a 13-year old boy was shot and paralyzed. Another boy was reportedly

taken from the bus by soldiers and tortured with electricity applied to his wrists, and threatened in an effort to make him say that he had been armed and was planning to carry out a suicide attack at the army checkpoint.

Amnesty International also urged the Defence Minister to look into reports that Palestinian civilians, particularly young men, are being threatened and abused by soldiers at checkpoints on account of their identity. The Amnesty International delegation that visited north Lebanon in the past two weeks heard reports of tens of such cases, particularly in the Tripoli area, as well as at checkpoints between the Beqa' area of eastern Lebanon and Beirut, and in Beirut itself. In one case, a 30-year-old told Amnesty International that on 23 May he was returning from the Beqa' and detained at the Mafdoum army checkpoint as soon as soldiers saw his Palestinian ID, handcuffed, hooded, thrown "like an animal" into the back of a truck and driven to the Jbeil army barracks where he was stripped to his underpants, forced to kneel, pushed and insulted, but then released uncharged after four hours. In another case, two Palestinian men were detained on 2 June as they left a pharmacy at Bibneyn, had their hands tied behind their backs and were made to lie on the road. One had a soldier stand on his back while another soldier juted his rifle into the Palestinian's neck. They were driven in a truck to 'Abdi, where soldiers beat and struck them with rifle butts. Their medicine was destroyed by an officer who questioned them about Fatah al Islam and they were held overnight, then released uncharged next day. In a third case, a 26-year-old man told Amnesty International that he was returning on 3 June to al-Beddaawi from his work in Beirut and taken off a bus by soldiers when they found out he was Palestinian, made to lie in the road, stripped to his underpants and with his hands tied behind his back beaten on his body and neck with rifle butts and an iron bar and kicked, causing him to lose a tooth. He was then hooded and driven to the military barracks at 'Abdi, where he was held in a steel, concrete container with 15 others for four hours before being released uncharged. He now fears to travel outside al-Beddaawi in case he should suffer further harassment and assaults. For many Palestinians in north Lebanon, particularly day labourers, their fear of being harassed and assaulted at checkpoints has meant that they are unable to travel to their places of work and consequently their already precarious standard of living has dropped further at a critical time.

In its letter, Amnesty International said it recognized the Lebanese authorities' responsibility to ensure public safety and that army and police checkpoints were intended to deter and prevent further attacks by Fatah al-Islam or other armed groups and to apprehend members of such groups. However, the Minister should take urgent, concrete steps to prevent against further abuse of Palestinians at such roadblocks by reminding all soldiers and police of their obligation to respect human rights and by committing to ensure that all allegations of beatings and other violations of suspects' human rights will be investigated and, if found to be true, punished.

Amnesty International also informed the Minister of its grave disquiet at reports that several Lebanese soldiers were killed in cold blood by members of Fatah al-Islam at the start of the fighting and said that, if true, it utterly condemned such killings.