

# Lebanese ration cards considered despite no data on number of poor families

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BEIRUT: Subsidized food commodities are disappearing from store shelves minutes after being replenished, as people rush to stores amid talks about lifting subsidies by the end of Ramadan.

Caretaker Finance Minister Ghazi Wazni said in early April that the Lebanese Central Bank Gov. Riad Salameh informed him that "Lebanon's mandatory reserves to fund basic imports will run out by the end of May."

He also warned that "delays in launching a plan to reduce subsidies are costing the country \$500 million a month."

On Wednesday, a debate emerged about giving ration cards to struggling families. The card would accompany the lifting of subsidies to provide social safety.

President Michel Aoun met with a joint delegation of the Parliamentary Committee for National Economy, Trade, Industry and Planning and the Economic and Social Council.

The delegation handed Aoun a policy paper that considered an "entry point to redirect subsidies."

The paper was written with the participation of some ministers and other representatives of parliamentary blocs and political parties.

According to Aoun's media office, the paper suggested two strategies. It said the government should "enforce a number of urgent measures for 12 months, addressing gasoline, fuel oil, gas, medicine, wheat, electricity, and the rest of products, as well as working on reducing the public sector's expenditures in dollars and shifting the current subsidy policy into providing direct cash assistance, in line with the measures to gradually lift subsidies."

The media office added that the paper said the government must focus on "implementing rapid complementary actions that accompany the start of the gradual lifting of subsidies," in line with agreements with the International Monetary Fund and "based on an integrated government rescue, rehabilitation and recovery program, and implementing the required reforms so that the social protection strategy becomes part of the program."

A source at the Finance Ministry told Arab News that the debate was "a precursor to a basic requirement: Providing data and financing."

Until now, the Ministry of Social Affairs has not provided data on the poorest families which could be used for the issuing of ration cards.

The source added: "Lebanon's caretaker Prime Minister Hassan Diab visited Qatar two days earlier to ask for financing. However, and despite Qatar's empathy toward supporting Lebanon, funding needs agreements, which are

unavailable as long as there is no statistical data about the needy people.” The national currency has lost 85 percent of its value since the end of 2019, resulting in more than half the population falling into poverty.

Politicians have not agreed on a rescue plan or a new government since the resignation of Diab’s cabinet in August 2020.

The source said that the state’s obligatory reserves stand at \$15 billion, which is made of the hard currency deposits that local lenders have placed at the Central Bank.

Lebanon has spent \$1 billion on subsidies.

The source added: “Any next steps require a government decision. The Central Bank governor cannot act alone as he is following the government’s instructions in this context.”

Participants in the policy paper have estimated that the number of needy families ranges between 750,000 and 800,000. They said that if subsidies are lifted and the ration cards adopted, \$6 billion will be saved from the annual expenditure.

The paper comes as fears grow over the financial collapse leading to further hunger and unrest.

The Crisis Observatory at the American University of Beirut said in a report obtained by Arab News that “the weekly monitoring of the prices of 17 goods chosen as an approximate sample of food constantly needed by Lebanese families from vegetables, fruits, grains, meat, oils and dairy products, prices have significantly increased from January 2020 to April 2021, with the exception of flour.”

It added: “There is a continuous and significantly growing increase in the prices of oils, meat, sugar, fruits and vegetables, and the prices are prominently related to the dollar exchange rate in the black market, even when it comes to local produce such as vegetables, fruits, eggs, olives oil and dairy products.”

Head of Syndicate of Food Importers in Lebanon Hani Bohsali – who previously headed the delegation of importers that met with Salameh – told Arab News that the Central Bank governor “assured us that the products that were approved for subsidization will be subsidized, noting that subsidized products have lately diminished from 300 to 100 products, and not all of them are products that people need on a daily basis.”

Bohsali noted that “traders import unsubsidized goods which are required in the market, and we still import from the same sources. However, some traders are importing goods that are cheaper for consumers, in line with people’s purchasing capacity.”



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## [Egypt arrests 23 for Sunday's train accident](#)

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Wed, 2021-04-21 20:06

CAIRO: Hamada Al-Sawy, Egypt's public prosecutor, has ordered the arrest of 23 defendants involved in Sunday's train accident in Toukh, which killed 23 people and injured 139.

Those arrested include the train conductor, his assistant, the supervisor of the railway maintenance in the area where the accident occurred, the general director of track renovations, the general director of maintenance, mechanical engineers, and a group of workers and technicians specialized in

the maintenance of train vehicles.

Al-Sawy also ordered the arrest of the director of the railway engineering department in the area of the accident, as well as another engineer. They face charges of negligence and failure to observe laws and regulations while performing their jobs.

The public prosecution observed negligence in the maintenance of the trains, as well as forgery in official documents. It questioned 29 Egyptian Railway Authority officials, heard the testimony of 104 of those injured in the accident and authorized the burial of the identified bodies.

The public prosecution also formed a technical committee of specialists, including officials from the Armed Forces Engineering Authority, to carry out various inspections in order to determine the cause of the accident, which occurred at 2:05 p.m. in the country's Qalyubia Governate. The committee was tasked with inspecting the train and its safety and security devices, checking the validity of the railway lines at the site of the accident and the devices used in control rooms with light signals and identifying those responsible, directly or indirectly, for the accident.

The Cairo-Mansoura train No. 949 had left Cairo at 1:20 p.m. and was scheduled to arrive in Mansoura at 5 p.m.



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## UK admits no assessment made for impact of Yemen aid cut

Author:

Wed, 2021-04-21 19:38

LONDON: The UK government has admitted that it has not carried out an impact assessment for its 60 percent cut in aid to Yemen.

"We haven't done an impact assessment," Chris Bold, development director for Yemen at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), told the House of Commons international development committee.

The UN has categorized Yemen as having the world's worst humanitarian crisis, and British MPs are challenging the FCDO over what effect its cuts will have.

Ahead of the reduction in funding, James Cleverly, the UK's minister for the Middle East and North Africa, said Yemen is enduring a "terrible" and "heartbreaking" situation.

"The risk of famine is significant," he said, adding that Yemen is experiencing a spike in COVID-19 cases. "Infection numbers look as though they are doubling since the beginning of the year."

The FCDO is focusing most of its reduced funding on feeding people in Yemen, Cleverly said, while also looking at diplomatic efforts to end the conflict.

Addressing the committee, representatives from aid organizations gave assessments on the impact of the cuts.

Save the Children's Deputy Yemen Director Gillian Moyes said its cash-transfer program is expected to be closed by June.

The initiative, she added, had seen the number of families receiving acceptable food rise from 46 percent to 93 percent.

"We are having to assume the program will end, and we are preparing for that," Moyes said. "Our conclusion is that these kinds of gains can be lost."



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## [Deals signed during Egyptian PM's Libya visit](#)

Tue, 2021-04-20 18:30

CAIRO: Egyptian Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly, accompanied by a team of ministers, visited Tripoli on Tuesday to discuss economic and political cooperation with the Libyan Government of National Unity.

It followed instructions from Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, who is planning a visit to Libya.

During Madbouly's visit, several agreements were signed between the two governments, most notably on the establishment of power stations in Libya to strengthen its energy networks.

Libya is considered a natural extension of the Egyptian market, due to the geographical proximity and long history of trade exchange and cooperation between the two countries.

Egyptian companies are awaiting government decisions regarding participation in the reconstruction of Libya, which they hope will produce new opportunities in a renewed market.

According to local sources, Madbouly's visit is focussed on investments in the country, Egyptian labor issues and the reopening of diplomatic missions.

Last month, El-Sisi discussed with the head of the Libyan Presidential Council, Mohamed Al-Menfi, prospects for enhanced cooperation between the two countries.

El-Sisi stressed Egypt's full and absolute support for the new executive authority in Libya in all fields and for its success in holding general elections at the end of the year.

He said Egypt was fully prepared to provide its expertise to the Libyan government to help restore its national institutions, especially security and police forces, to achieve greater stability.

Since the beginning of the Libyan crisis, Egypt has promoted political settlement by hosting the warring factions in key meetings.



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## Syria's upcoming presidential election stirs bitterness, disappointment in refugees

Mon, 2021-04-19 20:32

BEIRUT: Syrian refugees in Lebanon have expressed bitterness and disappointment ahead of elections that are expected to keep President Bashar Assad in office.

The Syrian Parliament has set May 26 as the date for the poll.

Assad won in 2014 with more than 88 percent of the Syrian vote. He has not officially announced his candidacy to run in next month's election.

News that Syria's embassies had opened for voter registration was met with disappointment by refugees in Lebanon, who also expressed their frustration with the international community.

Abu Ahmad Souaiba, speaking on behalf of the Voice of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon, said the revolution was launched to "achieve freedom and dignity."

"Our disappointment today is great because of the failure to implement (UN) Security Council resolutions, which call for power transition not the re-election of Bashar Assad one more time," he told Arab News.

Syrian refugees in Lebanon have been distributed in the Bekaa Valley and on the country's northern borders since arriving in Lebanon, with the majority of those who took part in the revolution against Assad concentrated in the Aarsal area.

"There are three segments of Syrians in Lebanon," said Souaiba. "One segment includes families who have been living in Lebanon since before the revolution and those who are not affiliated with the opposition. The second includes the opposition, and these migrated to Lebanon in 2013 and 2014 because of the barrels of death (barrel bombs). The third includes those who are neither with the opposition nor with the regime, and those (people) came to Lebanon because of the economic crisis and are concerned about obtaining their livelihood and the sustenance of their families."



According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon decreased to 865,500 by the end of Dec. 2020.

Lebanon called on the UNHCR to suspend new registrations at the beginning of 2015.

About 55,000 have returned to Syria in recent years as part of repatriation efforts by Lebanese General Security and as part of a reconciliation program sponsored by Hezbollah in some Syrian towns.

Rumors are circulating that Hezbollah has set up committees to fill out census forms with the number of Syrian refugees present in certain areas ahead of taking them to voting stations on polling day.

Talk of a Hezbollah census has coincided with information that the Ministry of Interior is waiting for UNHCR data in order to prepare a mechanism for calculating the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

The ministry has been assigned this task in coordination with the Ministry of Social Affairs, Lebanese General Security and the UNHCR.

Arab News contacted UNHCR spokesperson Lisa Abu Khaled, but she refused to comment and only said there was "currently no refugee census."

Souaiba believed there was no need to recount the refugees because, around six weeks ago, a census was carried out by NGOs under the supervision of Lebanese military intelligence for refugees in camps and settlements, specifically in the Aarsal area which is open to the land connecting Lebanese and Syrian territories.

He also said there was news from inside Syria of hunger, even in Damascus, and painted a bleak picture of people's desperation to escape.

"There is no fuel and no electricity," he added. "A woman who fled to Lebanon with her children told me that her husband was arrested by Syrian authorities and his fate is still unknown. She is almost dying of starvation with her children. She preferred to flee to Lebanon with her children and borrowed \$100 to pay the smuggler. She thought that in Lebanon she would receive some food, and this is better than hunger in Syria."

A UNHCR study estimated that 89 percent of Syrian refugee families were living below the extreme poverty line in Lebanon in 2020, compared to 55 percent in 2019.



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