



Office of the Special Coordinator
for Lebanon

Bureau du Coordinateur Spécial
pour le Liban

Human Rights: Three priorities for Lebanon

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Lebanon was among the first signatories in 1948 to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was drafted in part by its representative to the United Nations, Charles Malek. Sixty-two years later, three key human rights priorities lie ahead for the country: protecting its diversity, ending all forms of discrimination, and adopting a National Human Rights Action Plan, which is currently under development in Parliament.

Since the days of Charles Malek, and despite difficult periods in its modern history, Lebanon has taken significant steps towards the full realization of human rights, including the adoption of key international instruments. Less than a month ago, Lebanon underwent the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the Human Rights Council in Geneva. This is an inter-governmental public peer review process of the human rights record of all 192 members of the United Nations, which takes place once every four years. Lebanon's delegation presented the country's shortcomings and achievements as well as its future intentions, and received recommendations on further steps to be taken over the next four years. Lebanon successfully prepared its own submission, with the participation of a variety of government entities. Civil society organizations also played a significant role in the process through their own separate contributions.

During the discussions in Geneva, Lebanon's delegation highlighted the country's unique cultural and religious diversity. Its protection must, I believe, remain a top priority for Lebanon and the international community alike in the coming years. In order to safeguard this rich diversity, as well as the country's message of coexistence and tolerance, a second key priority for human rights efforts in Lebanon must be to end all forms of discrimination.

For example, Lebanon ratified the Convention to End All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1996, but did so with significant reservations. Some of these relate to existing imbalances in Lebanese law, including equality before the law, a woman's right to transmit citizenship, the lack of legal protection against domestic violence and so called "honour killings", and women's legal rights in personal status laws governing marriage, divorce, custody of children and inheritance.

Migrant domestic workers – usually women from developing countries – also face unacceptable forms of discrimination in legal status and treatment. These women, who leave their own homes and families out of economic necessity, should be respected and protected in Lebanon, in accordance with international standards. The United Nations

looks forward to continued collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and other governmental bodies in improving the protection of migrant domestic workers. I urge Parliament to expedite the adoption of draft legislation tackling the issue of violence against women and to strengthen the legal ground for gender equality.

Another area in which Lebanon has recently undertaken some positive steps but where more remains to be done, is the country's treatment of Palestinian refugees. On the 17th of August this year, Lebanon adopted legislation to improve the access of Palestinian refugees to the labour market, with some exceptions. This was an important first step. However, pending a just and fair solution to the refugee problem in the context of a comprehensive regional peace agreement and a return of the refugees to their homeland, Lebanon, supported by the United Nations family, can and should do more to end discrimination and improve the living and working conditions of Palestinian refugees in the country.

Equally important is the plight of non-Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, primarily Iraqi nationals, who have escaped the cycle of violence in their country and are seeking temporary refuge in countries across the region, including Lebanon. I am heartened by the constructive engagement currently taking place between the United Nations and the Government on ways that would allow refugees to live in this country without fear of arrest, detention and expulsion.

Whether addressing the status and rights of women or those of refugees in Lebanon, Parliament's human rights committee has been engaged in a debate over key human rights issues. It has almost completed its work on a National Human Rights Action Plan, which would establish a dedicated independent human rights body, procedural safeguards in many sectors and identify gaps between Lebanon's domestic legislation and its international human rights obligations. The finalisation and implementation of this Plan is the third human rights priority that I see for the forthcoming period.

Consultations have taken place over the past five years amongst the committee, government agencies, human rights defenders and civil society, with the support of the United Nations. These have generated great expectations. Completing the Action Plan and submitting it to the Cabinet and Parliament for review and vote will send a powerful message about Lebanon's determination to close the remaining gaps in the country's current human rights protection system. We should collectively support the adoption and implementation of the Action Plan, as a matter of priority.

This year's global celebration of Human Rights Day is dedicated to "human rights defenders who act to end discrimination". I believe that human rights concern us all and that every Lebanese and every resident of this country can benefit from the initiatives mentioned above. Lebanon can do a great deal to further improve its human rights record and can count on the support of its friends and partners in the international community in this effort.

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