Lebanon regulations 'put Syrian refugees at risk of abuse'

January 12, 2016

BBC News

http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35290904

Regulations being imposed in Lebanon effectively bar many Syrian refugees from renewing their residency permits, Human Rights Watch says.

[A report found](https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/12/lebanon-residency-rules-put-syrians-risk) most Syrians had lost their legal status since the measures were adopted a year ago, putting them at risk of exploitation and abuse.

Only two out of the 40 refugees HRW researchers interviewed said they had been able to renew their residencies.

Last week, the Lebanese authorities forcefully repatriated 400 Syrians.

They had arrived at Beirut's international airport with the intention of travelling on to Turkey but were unable to board connecting Turkish Airlines flights before new visa regulations for Syrians imposed by the Turkish authorities came into force.

Amnesty International [called](https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2016/01/lebanon-forcible-return-of-more-than-100-refugees-to-syria-a-shocking-setback/) Lebanon's decision to deport the Syrians "an outrageous breach" of its international obligations to protect refugees.

Lebanon is home to more than 1.07 million Syrians who have fled their country since the start of the civil war almost five years ago.

Under the residency regulations introduced last January, refugees applying to renew their residency permits are sorted into two categories: those registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and those who are not and must find a Lebanese sponsor.

HRW found that prohibitive paperwork requirements and fees, combined with arbitrary application of the regulations, effectively barred Syrians in both categories from renewal.

Image copyright AP Image caption Human Rights Watch said the residency regulations were making life impossible for refugees

There are no official statistics, but local and international aid workers told HRW that most Syrians they were assisting had lost their legal status.

Almost all the refugees interviewed by HRW's researchers said they could not pay the $200 (£139) annual residency renewal fee. The UNHCR says 70% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon fall below the poverty line and rely on aid to survive.

HRW said the need to find a sponsor increased Syrians' exposure to harassment and facilitated corruption.

One refugee was quoted as saying that sponsors were making a business out of the Syria crisis, selling sponsorships for up to $1,000 a person. "Potential sponsors wait on the Syrian border or at the airport to sell sponsorships to new arrivals," the refugee said.

Another told HRW that the fact that his sponsor was his employer had locked him into an endless cycle of abuse and exploitation.

"My boss makes me work more than 12 hours a day at his shop," he said. "Sometimes I complain but then he threatens to cancel my sponsorship. What can I do? I have to do whatever he says. I feel like his slave."

Five women refugees told HRW that sponsors and employers had attempted to sexually exploit them, and that they did not dare approach the authorities to complain.

"These residency regulations are making life impossible for refugees in Lebanon and are pushing them underground," said Nadim Houry, HRW's deputy Middle East director. "The last thing Lebanon needs is a large, undocumented community living at the margins of society, at heightened risk of abuse."