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Devastating impact of conflict on persons with disabilities living in Lebanon

The latest uptick in violence between Israel and Lebanon is an evident spillover of the war waged on Gaza since October 2023. The rapid escalation of violence in Lebanon during September 2024 and continued airstrikes by the Israeli military across Lebanon's south, Bekaa valley, northern areas of Hermel, as well as parts of Beirut comes with the immediate consequences of hundreds of people killed and injured. People have been displaced in the past months and the wave of forced displacement is even increasing due to the continuous exchange of fire and deliberate attacks in populated areas. Persons with disabilities have been gravely affected by these dynamics, living in inadequate housing, lacking essential services and access to livelihoods and often, during displacement, are left behind.

Humanitarian situation in Lebanon

Before the latest uptick in hostilities began in Lebanon in October 2023, around **3.2 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance**, including 1.5 million Syrian refugees and 200,000 Palestinian refugees. According to the OCHA flash update issued on 28 September 2024¹, the number of casualties has been steadily increasing and presently stands at 10,048, with **1,640 people killed**, and **8,408 injured**.

211,319 individuals have been internally displaced, many living in makeshift shelters and in harrowing conditions. Those who did not leave southern Lebanon are faced with intensified daily shelling, airstrikes, destruction of vital infrastructure and a complete halt to or a significant decline in services. Since 23 September when Israel intensified attacks on Lebanon, **airstrikes have impacted 25 water establishments** affecting access to clean water for nearly 300,000 people. Furthermore, **at least 37 Primary Health Care Centers (PHCCs) have been forced to close** due to the violence, significantly limiting healthcare access.² Previous calculations by UNOCHA estimated that **damages in southern Lebanon stood at \$1.7 billion**, however the cost has increased drastically and continues to rise. At the same time **humanitarian funding remains critically low**, with sectors like food security under the response funded at only 5%, despite the country's acute needs.

The continuation of hostilities in border areas, the challenging socioeconomic situation, and reduced humanitarian funding, have impacted all residents across Lebanon. The hardest hit are those marginalised and most vulnerable, particularly persons with disabilities, IDPs, refugees and hosting communities. For example, persons with disabilities had already suffered from **systemic**

[1 Lebanon: Flash Update #25 - Escalation of hostilities in South Lebanon, as of 23 August 2024](#)

[2 Lebanon: At a Glance - Escalation of hostilities in South Lebanon, as of 28 September 2024](#)

lack of services and specialised services and had **limited access to livelihoods**. While Syrian refugees continue to experience further restrictions and discrimination, Syrian refugees with disabilities often live in harrowing conditions and in deep poverty.

The escalation of conflict in southern Lebanon and its expansion to areas like the Bekaa Valley have further exacerbated those challenges leading to increased displacement, heightened vulnerabilities, and greater protection risks for those in conflict zones. Furthermore, with disruptions in essential services such as education and healthcare, along with a decrease in livelihood opportunities, damage to infrastructure, and civilian casualties, the prospect of reaching a dignified life for persons with disabilities or even of return home to the pre-October 2023 adverse levels of services without sustainable access to care or livelihoods is looking bleaker every day.

Living with disabilities in Lebanon

According to the July 2023 household survey conducted by the Inter-Agency Coordination in Lebanon, **persons with disabilities make-up roughly 13% of the overall population² with only 7% recorded to have access to protection services**. Persons with disabilities in displacement suffer additional challenges; many displaced persons with disabilities face multiple protection risks in all stages of their displacement cycle and are often at a heightened risk of discrimination and exclusion from access to basic services. Furthermore, displaced persons with disabilities are **often subject to different forms of abuse**, most commonly **neglect and separation from caregivers, stress, anxiety and high levels of mental health concerns**. Many lack meaningful opportunities, including education and livelihoods, and are **often discriminated against based on their disability**.

Responding to the needs of persons with disabilities remains difficult, especially since October 2023. Communities in South Lebanon, where disability prevalence was among the highest in Lebanon even before October 2023, have been suffering the most frequent attacks while at the same time being among the most difficult to reach. Apart from access, organizations responding to displacement in southern Lebanon face **barriers in accessing information, lack of inclusive programming in the response, and little to no inclusion of persons with disabilities in data and information management**, which further **reduces visibility of needs and inhibits meaningful response**. These challenges come on top of **chronic lack of funding to respond** to the unique needs of persons with disabilities, both those living in their communities and those living in displacement settings.

Caregivers provide the most sustained, consistent and efficient care for persons with disabilities. However, their support needs are often overlooked, risking the wellbeing of both caregiver and

the person with disabilities. There is an urgent need to ensure that the **needs of caregivers are not excluded from emergency preparedness and response actions.**



Photo caption: Dalal, 8, a child with cerebral palsy, tries her new wheelchair during a physiotherapy session in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley - ©H Archive/ L. Lamotte.

Following the needs assessment conducted by HI in November 2023 shortly after the beginning of the crisis, it was revealed that the **hospitals in areas close to the front lines were not prepared to absorb large-scale casualty intake**, particularly lacking staff, capacities, equipment and especially tools and facilities to be able to accommodate the unique needs of persons with disabilities. Related to the ongoing, and likely protracted crisis, accessibility, prosthetics and assistive devices, as well as consumables such as adult sanitary pads have been identified as the most urgent needs by the persons with disabilities themselves. Furthermore, access to adequate housing while in displacement and upon return, as well as access to livelihoods are a key to ensure that persons with disabilities can live their life in dignity.

The results from the November needs assessment pointed to systemic neglect to include persons with disabilities and their differing needs into adequate services, especially in situations of emergency. When HI, together with other humanitarian actors, responded to provide relevant equipment, supplies and capacity strengthening, the facilities were more prepared to respond to both mass casualties, as well as to meet the immediate needs of persons with long-term, functional disabilities.

Despite this initial investment to enhance preparedness, as the conflict becomes more protracted, the needs of persons with disabilities and their caregivers continue to grow. Recent Key Informant Interviews conducted with hospital managers and individual recipients of rehabilitation and assistive device support, identified additional needs. Communities nationwide are reporting increased distress, manifesting in symptoms such as bed wetting, and nightmares, all indicators mental health deterioration. As the national health system and social services are becoming overwhelmed with the increasing number of casualties coupled with extreme rise in individual needs, there is a concern that persons with disabilities and their caregivers will again be overlooked, To ensure sustained support to persons with all forms of disability and their caregivers, both during and after the conflict, a closer collaboration with relevant line ministries, sustained and long-term funding, and commitment and action by all humanitarian actors to include persons with disabilities in their programming will be essential.

Recommendations

For all stakeholders:

- An immediate Ceasefire in occupied Palestinian territory and in Lebanon and across the region is needed: forging an immediate, unconditional, and definitive ceasefire is the only way to end the suffering of civilians and save lives There must be a timely and transparent process to ensure accountability for all violations of International Humanitarian Law that have taken place and a call for justice to ensure an end to the cycles of violence.
- Systematically condemns all attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructures and the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.
- Prioritize the protection of civilians, humanitarian facilities and humanitarian workers
- Facilitate safe and rapid humanitarian access.

For donors:

- Scale up funding and ensure availability of sustained funding for both relevant ministries and humanitarian actors that will guarantee the deployment of emergency response along with long-term support that is inclusive of persons with disabilities and their caregivers and covers humanitarian and protracted needs.
- Engage in a meaningful dialogue, enhanced collaboration with and support to relevant ministries to guarantee their commitment to betterment of life, services and access to livelihoods for persons with disabilities in Lebanon.
- Require that standardization of inclusion of persons with disabilities and their caregivers in humanitarian response and recovery becomes mandatory for all humanitarian actors receiving support.
- Upon cessation of hostilities, there will be a need for comprehensive interventions by mine action actors to ensure that key infrastructure and private housing are free from

unexploded ordnance to avoid further casualties, and that people can return safely, free from harm.

For relevant authorities:

- Immediately and without further delay ratify the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- Recognise the urgency to meet the unique needs of persons with disabilities and their caregivers and ensure that adequate systems, resources and services are in place to ensure that they can live a life in dignity.
- Proactively engage with persons with disabilities to be able to make informed decisions that will trigger systematic changes beneficial for persons with disabilities and their caregivers.

For humanitarian actors:

- To include and engage persons with disabilities in their emergency response planning and their permanent programming is essential to lay the foundation for a better systemic inclusion of persons with disabilities in Lebanon once the conflict abates. Close collaboration and engagement of relevant ministries in planning and response will be a crucial component in ensuring a sustained approach to service delivery, support to and inclusion of persons with disabilities into Lebanon's social and welfare structures.
- Provide more structured mental health and psychosocial support to all communities affected by the conflict, such as positive parenting, problem management and recreational activities for children.
- Dedicate financial and human resources into advocacy towards local authorities and line ministries to include persons with disabilities in emergency and recovery planning and response.
- Actively partner and engage with organisations of persons with disabilities when designing, implementing and evaluating support provided to persons with disabilities and their caregivers.

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