

guardian.co.uk

An urgent call for aid

More than 90% of funds pledged towards short-term relief for Nahr el Bared in Lebanon have come from the West. Where are the Arab donors?



- o **Leila Shahid**
 - o guardian.co.uk,
 - o Saturday September 27 2008 14:04 BST
-

In Beirut on September 11, before 22 diplomatic missions, the government of Lebanon and United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) launched an appeal for short term relief for some 30, 000 Palestinian refugees displaced by the fighting last year at the Nahr el Bared camp in northern Lebanon. Egypt was the only Arab mission that attended besides the hosts, Lebanon. From UNRWA's Islamic Conference donors, only Iran was present.

UNRWA was appealing for nearly US\$43m to address the immediate and urgent needs, such as food and shelter, of some of the most disadvantaged people in the Middle East. Not only were their homes destroyed last year, not only did they flee in fear for their lives, not only did they lose almost all of their possessions, but they are also now, in the month of Ramadan, facing the threat of hunger and homelessness.

All of UNRWA's funds available at present for Nahr el Bared emergency relief, including a new American commitment of US\$4.3m, will be exhausted by the end of October. If no funds are forthcoming in response to the latest appeal, UNRWA will be unable to pay rental subsidies for 3,100 families housed in temporary accommodation. Neither will it be possible to maintain nearly 600 temporary shelters and 11 community buildings. Most worryingly of all, UNRWA will not be able to give food assistance to some 27,000 displaced refugees. What signal does this send to a people dispossessed for more than 60 years?

At the appeal launch on September 11, only the United States came forward with new money. More than 90% of the funds pledged so far towards short-term relief for Nahr el Bared have come from Western donors. In addition, of the money pledged for the long-term reconstruction of the camp and surrounding areas, 88% are Western donations.

Sadly this is part of a pattern. Luxembourg donates more than any Arab government to UNRWA's regular budget, while Norway gives more to the same budget annually than all Arab governments combined.

I hesitate to ask, and I do so only because the refugees are suffering: where are the Arab donors in the face of the alarming reality that will soon be upon us?

My question in no way masks heartfelt gratitude towards those in the Arab world who have given to UNRWA so willingly. Organisations, such as the Saudi Committee for the Relief of the Palestinian People, the United Arab Emirates Red Crescent Society, International Islamic Relief Organisation of Saudi Arabia, the Arab Authority for Agricultural Investment and Development, the Qatari Red Crescent Society and Dubai Cares have donated generously to UNRWA, demonstrating that public opinion in the Arab world is far from indifferent to the suffering of Palestinian refugees. The countries that host the refugees – Jordan, Syria and Lebanon – and we in the Palestinian Authority, contribute substantially to the welfare of our Palestinian sisters and brothers. And of course many Arab countries generously assist the Palestinian Authority.

A year ago the Saudi Arabian government donated to UNRWA \$12m for the refugees of Nahr El Bared while the United Arab Emirates donated \$5m. Since then, Arab donors (mostly NGOs) contributed \$8m, most of which is already spent due to the severity of the emergency. To date, however, Arab governments have not pledged anything to the long-term reconstruction of the camp, the largest single project in UNRWA's history, offering hope for a dignified future to people whose lives have been devastated.

Some say that the reconstruction of Nahr El Bared must await clarification of the political situation in Lebanon. This is frankly inhuman. People's basic needs cannot be kept on hold for months or even weeks.

The dramatic rise in the price of oil has had a deleterious impact on many. For UNRWA, the resulting rise in food and transport costs has hit hard, threatening the distribution of food to needy households and raising the cost of all UNRWA services.

This is yet another reason why I am now compelled, as a Palestine refugee from Lebanon myself, to renew my strong support for the appeal made earlier in September for the displaced refugees of Nahr El Bared. This situation is unprecedented in the recent history of UNRWA. We must do everything possible to avoid the agency being forced by financial necessity to make thousands of Palestine refugees homeless yet again.

• **guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2008**