



Lebanon's Palestinians: refugees for life

BEIRUT (AFP) — Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas's visited Beirut on Monday casts the spotlight on the plight of nearly 300,000 Palestinians in Lebanon who fear they are doomed to be refugees for life.



Palestinian children sit on a pile of dirt at the war-battered refugee camp of Nahr Al-Bared.

His brief trip comes amid renewed efforts to revive the Middle East peace process and concern in Lebanon's political circles that any deal struck on the refugee issue would be at the expense of the Lebanese.

"A permanent settlement of the Palestinians in Lebanon is a real demographic, political and security threat," Farid al-Khazen, a Lebanese MP and political science professor at the American University of Beirut, told AFP.

"Yet there is pressure toward such a solution which, if implemented, would lead to war and the destruction of Lebanon," he added.

The majority of the refugees arrived in Lebanon following the creation of Israel in 1948. A second wave arrived in the 1970s after Jordan's then king Hussein kicked out the Palestine Liberation Organization and thousands of its fighters.

The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees (UNRWA) lists nearly 400,000 refugees in Lebanon.

But Lebanese and Palestinian officials say the number actually resident in Lebanon may be as low as 250,000 as UNRWA does not strike off its figures Palestinians who move to other countries.

The refugees that remain live in dire conditions in 12 camps across the country of four million inhabitants.

They rely heavily on UNRWA for educational, health and other assistance because under Lebanese law they are banned from practicing most professions or from owning property.

While their presence in Lebanon was supposed to be short-lived, their chance of ever returning to their homeland has dimmed with every failed attempt to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

And the glimmer of hope raised following US President Barack Obama's bid to reinvigorate the peace process has been replaced by more bitterness and cynicism as each side digs in its heels.

"The slow pace and erratic progress of the negotiations means that final status, including the refugee issue, are in effect indefinitely postponed," UNRWA commissioner Karen Abu Zayd told AFP during a recent visit to Beirut.

"I'm very concerned of the lack of attention for the refugees in the peace process."

For the Lebanese, any mention of permanently settling the Palestinians in the tiny Mediterranean country prompts an outcry and warnings that this would upset the country's confessional balance and further exacerbate political divisions.

Fresh in the minds of many is the key role the Palestinians played in Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war, Israel's 1982 assault on Beirut and, more recently, the deadly 2007 battle at a Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon between an Al-Qaeda-inspired group and the Lebanese army.

But specialists and human rights groups warn that unless the refugee issue is addressed, the camps, already considered breeding grounds for extremism, could one day explode.

"The situation in the camps is beyond what is humanly acceptable," said Khalil Mekkawi, former head of the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee that was set up in 2005 to improve living conditions for the refugees.

"There is no hope whatsoever for people living in such misery."

Mekkawi said that although UNRWA requested 50 million dollars in 2006 to improve conditions in the camps, donors had responded with only 16 million dollars which represent "a drop in the ocean".

Souheil El-Natour, a Palestinian analyst and member of the leftist Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, said the refugee issue had fallen victim to Lebanon's sectarian divisions.

"The question of permanent settlement is being used as a scare tactic in Lebanese politics and this is denying the refugees their civil rights," Natour said.

Analysts warn that denying Palestinians basic rights and putting the camps off-limits to the Lebanese army allow extremist groups and outlaws to gain a foothold.

"The extremism is in large part because of the lack of a solution," Abu Zayd said. "These people are people without hope, who can't see what the future holds."

"Their plight is not only the responsibility of the Lebanese government, it's an international responsibility."

Libya's Qadhafi and some Muslim clerics urge Swiss to drop minaret ban

Having long touted neutrality and moderation in world affairs, Switzerland is now being accused of fanning the flames of religious extremism by voting in a referendum to outlaw the building of mosque minarets.

Libyan leader Moammar Qadhafi says the Swiss are now supporting terrorism, at least indirectly.

The famously long-winded Qadhafi spoke for 78 minutes this weekend on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of his rule, according to Libyan television, which carried the speech live.

Qadhafi said the vote late last month will help Osama bin Laden recruit associates.

"Switzerland has done the so-called Al Qaeda, or the terrorists, the biggest favor," he said.

The referendum results already have sparked an uproar in Europe, and condemnations in Iran and Egypt.

Now concern about the referendum is emerging as a major issue in the Middle East.

Jordan's Islamic Action Front, the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, has asked the Swiss to rescind the ban lest it risk jeopardizing relations with the Arab world. Ishaq Farhan, a leader of the group, called the referendum racist and discriminatory, according to the English-language Jordan Times.

He warned that there would be dire consequences if Switzerland didn't overturn the ban, including the possibility that the leaders and royal families of oil-rich Persian Gulf would refuse to bank with the Swiss.

"If Switzerland remains adamant in discriminating against Muslims, Muslim nations, particularly the oil-rich Arab Gulf states, will pressure their governments to take retaliatory measures, including economic sanctions," he said. "Think of your interests. You are in need of oil, gas, seaports, seas, solar energy and investments. Be careful before you lose all that."

He warned that adhering to the ban would affect Switzerland's relations with the entire Muslim world, including giants such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Malaysia and India. "Swiss tourists and Swiss nationals will be boycotted," he added.

Sunni clerics in the tiny oil-rich state of Bahrain said the ban



showed the West's hypocrisy.

"The ban sharply contrasts with the pompous claims often made by the West about freedom of religion, human rights and tolerance," Jassim Saeedi, an independent member of parliament in the lower house of the bicameral parliament, told worshippers Friday, according to a report in the Dubai-based Gulf News.

At least one cleric, though, urged the faithful to remain calm.

"Angry and passionate reactions will inevitably result in negative results and will not help settle the issue," Abdul Rahman Fadil told worshippers in Bahrain. "Dialogue and open conversations should be the standard in addressing the ban."

Qadhafi, however, lambasted the Swiss. His country and Switzerland have been on the outs ever since authorities briefly detained Qadhafi's son for allegedly hurting a domestic servant traveling with his family in Switzerland.

"We tell them that the minaret is at the heart of the mosque," he said. "How can we tell a mosque from any other place if we did not see the minaret?"

The Swiss, he said, should not worry that Muslims were trying to take over their country. "We do not wish for Switzerland to be a Muslim country, so that they would not go to heaven and would not receive God's mercy," he said. "We would want them to remain pagan."

(Source: latimes.com)

Ex-UN nuclear chief critiques Egypt's democracy

CAIRO (AP) — The former chief of the UN's nuclear agency critiqued Egypt's lack of democracy after reform-minded Egyptian youths urged him to come home and run for president.

In an open letter published in newspapers over the weekend, Mohamed ElBaradei said he would only consider the prospect if the country made sweeping democratic strides. The remarks by the Nobel Peace Prize winner triggered a wave of backlash in government media that sought to discredit him by calling him an American stooge.

The prospect that either President Hosni Mubarak — who has ruled for 28 years — or his son will run and win the 2011 election led Egypt's opposition parties and other activists to seek out and support anyone who might put up a fighting chance against the ruling party.

Besides ElBaradei, names that have been floated include Arab League chief Amr Moussa and Egyptian-American chemist Ahmed Zewail, who is also a Nobel laureate.

ElBaradei, who has lived in the West for nearly three decades, said he would only consider running if the constitution were amended to allow any Egyptian to run for president and remove restrictions that make it nearly impossible for independents or newcomers to enter the race.

He also said elections must be monitored by international observers, the Egyptian judiciary and an independent civil body, instead of being overseen by the Interior Ministry, which controls Egypt's internal security forces.

In his letter, ElBaradei wrote that without such changes, the elections would lack legitimacy and "will end as expected, like a Greek tragedy."

"If I decide to run for this high post — one that I didn't seek — it would only be if the majority of Egyptians, regardless of their affiliations, consider this in the interests of the nation," ElBaradei wrote.

Jordan urges EU to oppose Israel settlements in Beit-ul-Moqaddas

AMMAN (AFP) — Jordan's King Abdullah II on Sunday urged the European Union to help put a halt to Israeli settlement building in Beit-ul-Moqaddas, ahead of an EU foreign ministers' meeting in Brussels.

"European countries should press Israel to stop its unilateral actions in Jerusalem, (Beit-ul-Moqaddas) a palace statement quoted the monarch as telling EU ambassadors to Amman at a meeting.

"Such actions threaten Muslim and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem (beit-ul-Moqaddas), seek to change the city's



In this Nov. 27, 2009 photo made available by the IAEA, Mohamed ElBaradei, talks to members of staff, during a farewell reception with staff, at Vienna's International Center.

ElBaradei, who briefly served in the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, is one of four Egyptian Nobel laureates. He gained stature for his handling of Iran and North Korea's nuclear files at the U.N.'s International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna, and for challenging Washington's claims that Saddam Hussein had a secret nuclear program.

"He has all the criteria that the Egyptians need," said Alaa el-Aswani, a writer and vocal critic of the government. ElBaradei has no connection with Egypt's current regime and so "is a model, an inspiration, who has clean hands," he added.

El-Aswani said ElBaradei's input is more of a "road map" for reform than a real pitch for the 2011 election.

The campaign to persuade ElBaradei to run began as a group on the social networking site Facebook.

One group posted ElBaradei's photo with the caption "yes we can" under it, borrowing President Barack Obama's campaign slogan.

Mubarak supporters were less than enthusiastic.

Pro-government newspapers called him arrogant, uninformed and an American stooge.

One editorial said ElBaradei's comments were tantamount to a constitutional coup. Another said he was propagating ideas that would allow Muslim fundamentalists to get hold of the keys to power.

ElBaradei, the son of a prominent lawyer who headed the Egyptian Bar Association in the 1960s and lobbied for democratic reforms, didn't respond. But in an appearance on a private television station last month, he said he learned from his father, a prominent lawyer who lobbied for democratic reforms in the 1960s, to speak the "truth and keep going."

"We shouldn't fool ourselves. ... We've reached rock bottom," he said.

landmarks and get rid of Arab residents there," he said, referring to settlement building in the Holy City's mainly Arab eastern sector.

The king hailed a proposal by the EU's current Swedish presidency that east Beit-ul-Moqaddas should become the capital of a future Palestinian state as part of a Middle East peace deal.

"Peace, stability and security will not be achieved in the region unless an independent Palestinian state is established," said the king, whose country

signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1994.

A row has broken out between Israel and the EU over a proposal that the bloc call for an "independent, democratic, contiguous and viable state of Palestine comprising the West Bank and Gaza and with east Beit-ul-Moqaddas as its capital."

The draft text was prepared for a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Brussels on Wednesday, but diplomats said it could change ahead of the talks because of opposition from member states.



Iraq poll preparation begins

BAGHDAD (AFP) — Iraq's electoral authorities began preparations for parliamentary polls early next year, after MPs finally approved a law governing the vote just minutes before a midnight deadline.

Protracted negotiations over the law lasted more than two months, but lawmakers passed it late Sunday evening, paving the way for elections early next year.

"The law has been adopted with near-unanimity," said parliament speaker Iyad al-Samarrai in the Council of Representatives chamber. He did not give a breakdown of the vote because it passed by a substantial majority.

The presidency council, made up of President Jalal Talabani and his two deputies, now has to announce a date for the election, with the United Nations noting that holding it on February 27 would be "feasible".

The new law sidesteps a veto that Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi had threatened, and came just minutes before a midnight deadline for Hashemi to torpedo the law.

Hashemi, who had vetoed a previous version of the law last month, welcomed the legislation, telling the al-Sharqiya television channel: "I hope this is a step forward in the construction of the state of Iraq."

The law will expand parliament from 275 seats to 325, 310 of which will be allotted to Iraq's 18 provinces, with the remainder reserved for religious minorities and blocs that garnered national support but did not win seats in individual provinces.

It is a revised version of the first draft of the election law, with three additional seats for provinces in northern Iraq's autonomous region of Kurdistan, and one fewer reserved seat.

Kurdish parties expressed concerns that their seat allocations in the original law had not risen above those agreed for the last general election in 2005, while predominantly Sunni and Shiite provinces had seen increases, a parliamentary official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The official told AFP that UN and U.S. diplomats lobbied MPs over the weekend to reach agreement on the law, which had been debated by lawmakers for more than two months.

No definitive date has yet been set for the election which had originally been scheduled for January 16 but was delayed because of the failure by MPs to agree on the new law.

The United Nations on Wednesday proposed February 27 as the most "feasible" date for parliamentary elections, nearly a month later than the deadline laid down by the constitution.

Samarrai has said previously that the election could be delayed to as late as March.

In principle, the constitution requires that the general election, the second since a U.S.-led invasion ousted dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003, be held by the end of January.

An electoral law was initially passed on November 8 but Hashemi, a Sunni, vetoed it 10 days later, citing a lack of representation for Iraqi exiles, the vast majority of whom are Sunnis.

MPs subsequently passed a second version, which Hashemi threatened to veto, that upped the number of seats for Kurds but reduced that figure for Sunnis, leading to the protracted negotiations that concluded on Sunday evening.