TOP 2 17.05.2018 | Mireille Girard

‘When resources are scarce, you can only be generous for a while’

UNHCR’s Mireille Girard talks about Lebanon’s effort to host Syrian refugees and the need for continued international support

While EU member states have been closing their borders to refugees fleeing war-torn Syria, and striking deals with Middle-Eastern countries to keep them out, Lebanon – a relatively poor nation of 4.4 million people – has accommodated over one million Syrians since 2011. That’s the most, on a per capita basis, of any country in the world.

However, as Lebanon faces its own financial hardships and sectarian divisions, its generous welcome is beginning to wear thin. 29 percent of Lebanese and 78 per cent of Syrian refugees live below the poverty line. Economic growth is falling and the national debt is high.

Mireille Girard, who represents the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Beirut, spoke to Daniel Kopp about the challenges facing the country, the Syrian crisis, and the EU’s role in dealing with the conflict.

We’re here at a donor conference in Brussels aimed at ‘supporting the future of Syria and the region’. What are you hoping it will achieve?

Well, this is the biggest crisis we’ve had since the Second World War, and countries supporting Syrian refugees need all the support they can get. Even though we’re now past the seventh year of the Syrian conflict, we’re still very much in a humanitarian crisis. So we can’t let aid drop. This humanitarian safety net is keeping people alive.

The second message is that countries in the region are struggling. They’re wondering: how much longer can this go on? When your resources are scarce and you have to share them with a large number of people, you can only be generous for a while.

And the third message is: let’s bring an end to this crisis altogether by tackling the root cause of the problem. And the root cause is the war

in Syria. It's good to thank the host countries for their generosity, but that doesn't bring solutions. What we need is humanitarian aid, continued hospitality and protection for refugees, but there's also a political dimension to this.

So you're saying we need the political will to solve the crisis?

Absolutely. This is what the refugees are telling us. They're saying, 'thank you for your aid, but help us go back home to a place that is safe for us. We need safety in Syria; we need to be able to return to our homes and continue our life where we left off.'

How do you see the role of the EU specifically, not only in the political process but also in terms of aiding the countries that are taking in the refugees?

The fact the European Union is hosting this conference alongside the UN is testament to its determination. The EU is supporting the host countries financially, and [EU High Representative Federica] Mogherini has also reiterated her determination to really push this political process and support the UN peace talks. That's really important for us.

But the European Union can also help by resettling refugees on European soil. We know it's a sensitive issue.

Europe's done a lot. If you take all the European countries together, they are the territories receiving some of the largest number of refugees through formal programmes. I'm not talking about the people who crossed the Mediterranean in 2015. I mean the regular programmes whereby countries in the region, such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, have sent the most vulnerable refugees – those who cannot wait for peace in Syria – to the EU for resettlement. In Europe, they can benefit from education, healthcare if they've been victim of torture or trauma, and reintegration programmes, enabling these refugees to bounce back and get on with their lives.

General elections were held earlier this month in Lebanon. Did the issue of refugees play a large role in the election campaign?

Well, you know, the refugee issue is very sensitive in Lebanon because of the sheer numbers of people the country's received and its stretched resources. But fortunately it hasn't really been a feature of political debate.

Of course, the refugee issue is always at the back of everyone's mind in Lebanon, but it wasn't used as a political tool during the campaign. This is important because it's very much a humanitarian issue. It's not

about politics; it's about human beings.

In April, Lebanon received some 11 billion US dollars at a separate donor conference. What will this money be used for?

This is a long-running project aimed at reinforcing Lebanon's infrastructure and generating economic growth.

The war in Syria, rather than refugees themselves, has had a huge impact on Lebanon's economy. It's led to a drop in exports and tourism. But the presence of the refugees also translates into pressure on public services.

The way to relaunch the economy is to invest in infrastructure. Infrastructure – health, irrigation, water provision – will help provide more services to a larger population, and plug gaps in services that existed in Lebanon even before this crisis. At the same time, new infrastructure generates employment opportunities, particularly for those that are most vulnerable – in the unskilled labour market, construction or agriculture.

Turkey has de facto closed its border to Syrian refugees. Has Lebanon done the same?

I think all the countries around Syria have in turn closed their borders. They all have visa systems that determine who is allowed in and who is going out. At first there were visa facilities for Syrians across the region; people were able to move back and forth. This is not possible any more. Over the past two or three years each country in turn has added a visa system. So people cannot flee to these countries in large numbers. There are exceptions on humanitarian grounds, but the numbers are very small.



Mireille Girard
Beirut

Mireille Girard has served as Representative for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Lebanon since July 2015. Prior to taking up her assignment in Lebanon, she served as Representative for UNHCR in Thailand and South Sudan. Her career in UNHCR spans over 22 years

and includes a range of functions both at UNHCR Headquarters in Geneva and in country operations on the Asian, African, European and Middle Eastern continents.