

Lebanon: UN expert warns of ‘failing State’ amid widespread poverty

GENEVA (11 May 2022) – The destructive actions of Lebanon’s political and financial leaders are responsible for forcing most of the country’s population into poverty, in violation of international human rights law, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Olivier De Schutter, said in a report published [today](#).

The report follows a country visit to Lebanon and an investigation into the root causes and impacts of the country’s worst economic and financial crisis in history.

“Impunity, corruption, and structural inequality have been baked into a venal political and economic system designed to fail those at the bottom, but it doesn’t have to be that way,” said De Schutter, an [independent expert](#) appointed by the UN Human Rights Council.

“The political establishment knew about the looming cataclysm for years but did little to avert it. Well-connected individuals even moved their money out of the country, facilitated by a legal vacuum that allowed capital to flow out of the country. Truth and accountability must be sought as a matter of human rights.”

With parliamentary elections on 15 May, the UN expert called on the next government to place accountability and transparency at the “heart and centre of its actions,” starting with publicly disclosing its own finances and conflicts of interest and demanding that Central Bank officials do the same.

Lebanon’s man-made economic crisis started in 2019, and today the country stands as “a failing State”, the UN expert said. He cited current estimates that put four in every five people in poverty.

“Political connections with the banking system are pervasive, pointing at serious concerns about conflicts of interest in their handling of the economy and people’s savings,” De Schutter said.

“There is no accountability built into the latest rescue plan, critical to restoring the lost confidence of the population and the financial sector. We’re talking about national wealth that belongs to the public in Lebanon and that was squandered over decades of mismanagement and misplaced investments by the Government and the Central Bank.

“Central Bank policies, in particular, led to a downward spiral of the currency, the devastation of the economy, the wiping out of people’s lifetime savings and to plunging the population into poverty. The conclusion of my report is that the Central Bank has brought the Lebanese State into clear contravention of international human rights law.

“Political leadership is completely out of touch with reality, including with the desperation they’ve created by destroying people’s lives. Lebanon is also one of the most unequal countries in the world, yet leadership seems unaware of this at best, and comfortable with it at worst.”

De Schutter said there was a serious lack of robust social protection mechanisms. “As it currently stands, it is a system that protects the rich while leaving poor families to fend for themselves,” he said. “Public services, including electricity, education, and healthcare, have been gutted, with a State that heavily subsidises private provisioning of these services. Over a quarter of all public education expenditures go to the private sector, which exacerbates inequality, does not lead to better education, and leads to higher dropouts among children from poor households.

“More than half of families report that their child has had to skip meals, and hundreds of thousands of children are out of school,” he added. “If the situation does not improve immediately, an entire generation of children will be sacrificed.”

The UN expert criticised decades of underinvestment in the public healthcare system and the Government’s “disgraceful” partial removal of subsidies on essential medicines. “Medicines remain in severe shortage and prices for chronic disease medication have increased at least fourfold, an all but guaranteed death sentence for those most in need,” the UN poverty expert said.

Despite the dearth of official poverty data – which the Government does not systematically collect, in part owing to the lack of census since 1932 – estimates suggest that multidimensional poverty nearly doubled between 2019 and 2021, affecting 82 percent of the population last year.

The UN report finds Palestinian and Syrian refugees face disastrous living conditions in Lebanon, with 88 percent living under minimum survival conditions. Almost half of Syrian families are food insecure. “The horrendous plight of refugees is a direct result of the administrative and legal measures imposed by the State, which continues to sideline and blame them for its own failure to provide basic goods and services to the population, whether education, decent jobs, safe drinking water or electricity,” he said.

“If trust for a better future is to be restored, the Government must strengthen the Central Inspection, free the National Anti-Corruption Commission from potential political interference, ensure independent oversight of Électricité du Liban, and ingrain accountability and transparency into the recovery plan.”

The UN expert called on the incoming government to commit to improving its human rights record in all spheres by reducing inequality, fighting corruption and impunity, building strong and resilient social protection, education, and healthcare systems, and placing the interests of the public above private profits.

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Photos from the Special Rapporteur's visit to Lebanon are available for journalists' use [here](#).

Mr. Olivier De Schutter is the [UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights](#) since 1st May 2020. He was appointed by the UN Human Rights Council and is part of the [Special Procedures](#), the general name of the Council's independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. Special Procedures experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent from any government or organisation and serve in their individual capacity.

For more information and media requests, please contact Patricia Varela (+41 22 928 9234/ pvarela@ohchr.org) and Isabelle Delforge (+32/498522163 isabelle.delforge@srpoverty.org or media@srpoverty.org)

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