

BRIEFS

Blast in south Lebanon kills one, wounds soldier

BEIRUT: A woman was killed and soldier wounded Tuesday in south Lebanon as a result of an unspecified explosion, security sources told The Daily Star. The woman, Nada Hussein Ghannam, was killed next to Tarbikha gate in Marwahine village, south Lebanon, near the border with Israel, the sources said. They added that she was declared dead upon arrival to hospital in Bint Jbeil. A soldier was also wounded in the explosion. A Ghanaian contingent with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon and the Army are conducting a search of the area, and experts are trying to identify the cause of the explosion. — *The Daily Star*

Issue of Lebanese missing is complicated: Moussa

BEIRUT: The issue of the Lebanese missing in Syria is complicated and politics plays a role in it, head of the parliamentary Human Rights committee MP Michel Moussa said Tuesday. "Families of the missing Lebanese in Syria have the right to know the fate of their relatives, and this issue is complicated and politics plays a role in it," Moussa said following the committee's meeting with Justice Minister Shakib Qortbawi. Last week, Qortbawi announced that he was finalizing a draft decree to establish an Independent National Commission tasked with investigating the fate of missing Lebanese. According to Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile, there are at least 600 Lebanese in Syrian jails. Moussa said the commission could be established through a decree by the government once the Justice Ministry and NGOs agree on the tasks and prerogatives it would have. "There are no objections to establishing an independent commission but only different opinions on how to establish it and whether to expand its prerogatives." — *The Daily Star*

Amal delegation in China to bolster ties

BEIRUT: An Amal Movement delegation arrived in China Monday for an official 10-day visit aimed at developing ties with the Chinese Communist Party, Amal's office said Tuesday. Deputy Director-General of the Department of West Asian and North African Affairs in the Chinese Communist Party Chang Hua received the delegation upon its arrival at the airport. Amal's press office quoted Chang as describing the visit as a window to develop ties between the Amal Movement and the Chinese Communist Party. Chang added that Chinese officials held Speaker Nabih Berri in high esteem, primarily for his role in framing Lebanese politics and his party's role in community building. The head of the Lebanese delegation, Talal Sahili, thanked China for the warm reception and praised China's role in the international community. "China has a primary and important role in delineating international policies and in supporting people of the region and the world's just issues, especially countries that suffer from the hegemony of the global colonization [project]," Sahili said. — *The Daily Star*

JAD calls on government to follow up smoking ban

BEIRUT: The anti-drug organization Youth against Drugs (JAD) called on the government Tuesday to apply more stringent measures on the sale of tobacco to minors. JAD also urged all Lebanese to adhere to the smoking ban in public places, which came into effect on Sept. 3, saying the law has come years too late, the National News Agency reported. According to the NNA, JAD issued a statement stressing "the need to hurry in implementing the remaining stages of the law, increasing taxes on tobacco, and drafting a law that organizes the selling of tobacco." JAD asked people to implement the law and called on smokers whose health has been affected to press charges against tobacco companies. JAD asked parents not to be lenient with their children on the issue of smoking. — *The Daily Star*

AGENDA

Cabinet session

Presidential Palace, Baabda
Sept 5, 9:30 a.m.

A draft law for salary increases for civil servants will top the agenda of this week's Cabinet meeting, which will be headed by Prime Minister Michel Sleiman. Other important items on the agenda are a renewal of exclusivity of Lebanon's flag carrier Middle East Airlines.

UNRWA's role in the Syrian crisis

Crowne Plaza Hotel, Hamra
Sept 5, 9:30 a.m.

Organized by the Thabet Foundation, the workshop aims at discerning the role the United Nations Relief and Works Agency could play in light of the the 17-month-old crisis in Syria.

FEATURE

Palestinians escape frying pan into fire

Refugees from Syria stuck in Lebanon camps after overstaying visas are denied UNRWA aid

By Annie Slemrod
The Daily Star

SHATILA, Lebanon: A few hours after their arrival in Lebanon, Nayef and his family were already crowding outside the entryway to their new building, seeking some space. Their doorway had no door, there was no electricity, and the six relatives would be sharing two rooms with four others.

Having exchanged the Homs Palestinian refugee camp for Beirut's Shatila that day, Nayef was juggling his youngest son and a cigarette, he and his wife Rima surprisingly calm after a trip he reported had only "some danger."

More than 3,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria have approached Lebanon's branch of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency since the Syrian conflict began some 17 months ago, and according to UNRWA the number "has been steadily rising."

But while they escape a warzone by crossing the border, many refugees have found Lebanese legal restrictions mean they cannot work and are confined to overcrowded refugee camps.

Most Syrian-Palestinians who have sought out UNRWA are in Sidon, but at last count there were 85 families in Shatila, where conditions are dire. On the day Nayef moved in with his brother, volunteers were painting brightly colored murals on a camp wall. Around the corner was a waist-high rubbish heap and the crumbling building where Nayef and Rima would sleep was a far cry from the flowers and blue skies depicted in the beautification project.

According to UNRWA, most new refugees are bunking with family members, but some — like Nayef's upstairs neighbor Mahmoud — are renting.

After fleeing Syria a year ago, Mahmoud and his wife Ammi found refuge in two rooms which are nearly empty; they were robbed some time ago. Like all of those quoted, they did not want their real names published.

In Syria, they lived in a rented house in Baba Amr, funded by Mahmoud's job at an oil company. When the city fell under siege, they took their three children back to the Homs camp, but work became scarce and they were surrounded by checkpoints.

Mahmoud expected to find Lebanon hospitable, especially given the save haven Syrians offered Lebanese during the summer 2006 war with Israel.

"The opposite is happening," he said. His rent has doubled, the cost of living in Lebanon is high, and he can only find sporadic work in the camp.



Palestinian refugees who have fled the conflict in Syria gather in the entryway of a house where they are staying in Shatila.

And he can't leave to seek employment, for fear of arrest. When Syrian-Palestinians enter Lebanon, they receive a seven-day "transit" visa. Palestinians may apply to renew this visa at General Security, for LL50,000 per month per person.

Not only can this cost be prohibitive, but many refugees are unaware of the renewal option.

"As a Syrian-Palestinian, I'm not allowed to travel freely," Mahmoud explained. "If the authorities catch me, they'll take me to prison ... I'm scared to go out."

Another refugee, Nazmi, who has been in Lebanon for 10 months, said he once worked as a driver but now is stuck in Shatila, fearful after his brother

was arrested for overstaying his visa.

UNRWA said it is "advocating for a change in the procedure," but even if Syrian-Palestinians are able to leave the camps, they will still face a legal system that severely restricts the lives of Palestinian refugees.

Supporters of the Syrian regime have long touted its relatively good treatment of Palestinian refugees as one of its credentials as the anti-Israel "axis of resistance" alongside Hezbollah and Iran. Nazmi called the Syrian camps "heaven on earth" in comparison to Shatila.

Whereas in Syria Palestinians can work freely, in Lebanon they need difficult-to-acquire work permits and are barred outright from many professions.

Nearly half of registered Syrian refugees signed up in August

By Olivia Alabaster
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Nearly half of all registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon signed up over the last month, with the number increasing from 35,000 to 61,000 since early August, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees said Tuesday.

The majority, 55 percent, is in north Lebanon, with 42 percent in the Bekaa Valley, and the rest are residing in Mount Lebanon, Beirut and the south of the country.

At a conference in Geneva, UNHCR spokesperson Melissa Fleming said, "The number of refugees fleeing Syria rose sharply in August, with more than 100,000 people seeking asylum in surrounding countries — the highest monthly total of the Syria crisis to date."

The total number of Syrians seeking asylum across the region is currently 235,000, with around 80,000 each in Jordan and Turkey and around 18,000 in Iraq. Activists estimate the total figure of displaced Syrians in Lebanon, and indeed around the region, to be far higher, as many have

not come forward for assistance.

Of the latest total for Lebanon, 16,706 are awaiting registration, a group also included in the figure from Aug. 3.

The majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are staying with host families, whether acquaintances or strangers.

"Host families are increasingly stretched in their capacity to host refugees and UNHCR is appealing to authorities in Lebanon to approve alternative shelter options. In addition, some 180 families are staying in six schools due to open this month,"

Fleming said Tuesday.

Shelter is the biggest concern to the U.N. in Lebanon. On Monday, 20 families were evicted from the Al-Marj school in the West Bekaa. They were originally evicted last week, but were allowed to return after intervention from the UNHCR, its NGO partners and the Social Affairs Ministry.

The families spent Monday evening in the schoolyard, and contacts with local authorities for alternative options are being renewed, according to Natalie Hawwa, public information assistant at the UNHCR in Beirut.

UNDP boosts natural disaster preparedness

By Stephen Dockery
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Backed the United Nations Development Program and the Interior Ministry, municipalities began disaster risk reduction training Tuesday at the Grand Serail amid mounting concerns of natural disasters hitting the country.

The potential natural disasters facing the country are numerous, from large-scale calamities such as earthquakes and tsunamis due to Lebanon's location along volatile continental plates, to smaller scale events including floods and fires.

"The risks in Lebanon appear to me to be especially high. In my time here, I have traveled across the country several times, and I have noted in particular the unregulated way in which buildings are constructed, in neighborhoods, on mountainsides and along the coastlines," UNDP country director Luca Renda said.

Renda also said the extreme level of dilapidation of the country's infrastructure, as well as a general lack of access to public services, is putting the country at greater risk should a natural disaster strike.

"I am aware that solving these and other problems is not simple. It requires cooperation among ministries and local authorities, and private actors as well," he said.

The program will train local officials at 64 municipalities and eight municipal unions from all qadas in the country. Those trained in disaster response planning will then train a much larger group of municipal workers in the area with a focus on how city planning and development can affect response during a disaster.

Many experts say disaster response can be ineffective in the immediate aftermath if a response plan doesn't already exist, and the UNDP program has tried to set up a structure that can be used if a crisis occurs.

The training workshops are also

intended to bolster the presence of rural area government in general so disaster response can be pinpointed to the area in need.

"The vulnerability of the Lebanese population to disaster threats is compounded by the relatively small presence of the government ministries in peripheral regions," reads the UNDP analysis of Lebanon's disaster response.

Concerns over a natural disaster striking Lebanon have been a constant refrain from geologists given Lebanon's location near a Dead Sea fault zone that runs from the Gulf of Aqaba to Turkey. Public concern has increased over recent months when tremors were felt in Lebanon after small earthquakes occurred elsewhere in the region.

Many people are concerned over the possibility of a major earthquake that could cause chaos on Lebanon's cities. But experts warn that even relatively small earthquakes could wreak havoc in the country given many structures are aging, or poorly constructed and unable to stand the sway after a tremor.

"The workshop's importance stems from the fact that, usually in Lebanon, most efforts are directed toward response. This workshop comes in due time to involve municipalities in prevention, especially in a country that is prone to natural disasters, most notably earthquakes and being on an earthquake fault," said Raymond Medlej from the Interior Ministry.

The initial series of training is slated to be complete by mid-October. Private sector organizations are also scheduled to receive training.

A similar program of training was inaugurated several months ago for the Rafik Hariri International Airport to teach airport staff how to effectively receive and distribute massive amounts of aid after a disaster.

All of the efforts fit into a broad push to better prepare the country for disaster that has been ongoing for years. In 2009, a UNDP-led disaster management unit helped officials figure out which areas were most at risk and organize a response.

Tripoli shop owners demand compensation

By Antoine Amrieh
The Daily Star

TRIPOLI, Lebanon: The owners of shops damaged in the recent fighting in Tripoli demanded immediate compensation from the government's Higher Relief Committee, as the Army began Tuesday to survey the damage in the Bab al-Tabbaneh neighborhood.

The shop owners urged Prime Minister Najib Mikati to ask the Education Ministry to exempt the families of students in Bab al-Tabbaneh from having to pay tuition fees for 2012-2013.

Seventeen people were killed and over 120 wounded late last month in armed clashes between supporters of Syrian President Bashar Assad in the neighborhood of Jabal Mohsen and residents of Bab al-Tabbaneh where anti-Assad sentiment runs high.

Retailers torching of shops accompanied the clashes, some targeting establishments in Bab al-Tabbaneh. Similar rounds of violence broke out in May and June between the two districts.

The HRC will pay the compensation once this work is completed

The Army is surveying damages and the HRC will pay the compensation once its work is completed.

During a meeting in Tripoli Tuesday, the committee following up on compensation payments to shop owners in Bab al-Tabbaneh urged the HRC to accelerate the surveying process and to pay those shop owners whose businesses had been affected.

"This is because all shops in Bab al-Tabbaneh have sustained losses, lost their clients and capital and cannot continue business amid these difficult circumstances," the committee said.

On the request for neighborhood students to be excused from paying tuition fees this forthcoming academic year, the statement added: "This is because the students' parents could not afford paying tuition fees due to the security incidents which have occurred since May, resulting in a decline in the income of owners of shops."

"This might increase the level of school dropouts and create social instability in Bab al-Tabbaneh," the statement added.

Syrian siblings drown off south coast, body of third missing

By Mohammed Zaatari
The Daily Star

TYRE, Lebanon: Civil Defense personnel searched along the coast of the southern city of Tyre Tuesday for the body of a Syrian adolescent girl whose two siblings were found drowned a day earlier.

The father of the three — Salwa, Abbas and Shoayla Zeytoun — reported them missing Monday.

They were last seen swimming along the coast in Tyre.

The body of Salwa, 14, was found Monday night while the body of Abbas, 12, was recovered Tuesday morning. Search operations continued for 13-year-old Shoayla.

In a statement released Tuesday, Civil Defense said the incident occurred when four siblings were swimming along the Qasmiya coast Monday afternoon.

Three of the siblings drowned while the fourth one, Mohammad Zeytoun, survived after he went back to the coast, realizing the danger of the location, according to the statement.

Autopsies of the bodies revealed that Salwa and Abbas had swallowed excessive amounts of water as a result of strong waves.

Speaking to The Daily Star, a distraught Hasan Zeytoun said he was waiting for the divers to recover his daughter's body so that he could plan for his children's funerals.

"God gave them to me, and God took them away," Zeytoun said, as he tried to hold his tears back.

Surrounded by his relatives, Zeytoun cried: "The sea is treacherous!"

Zeytoun recently moved to Tyre for work purposes.

Salwa and Abbas were later buried in the Kfarbada Palestinian refugee camp, near Tyre.



Hasan Zeytoun, the father of the two Syrian siblings who drowned Monday, sits on the shore in Tyre.