

BRIEFS

Judicial Council distances itself from political disputes

BEIRUT: The Higher Judicial Council stressed the importance of having an independent judiciary Tuesday, saying it was ready to take responsibility for any mistake in judicial matters. A statement following the council's regular meeting warned against any attack on the judiciary and judges similar to what has happened during the last few months. "[Such actions] will weaken the power of one of the major constitutional authorities and will reflect negatively on the state and the public's trust in justice, in addition to endangering the safety of judges," the statement said. It also called on public and political officials to exclude the judicial system from any political bickering so as not to prevent it from carrying out its duties independently. The council added that its members were "ready to take responsibility for any malfunction in the judicial system," stressing that its positions were a reflection of its convictions. — *The Daily Star*

Police thwart escape attempt at Roumieh prison

BEIRUT: Police at Lebanon's Roumieh prison foiled an attempted prison break Tuesday, security sources said. Authorities at the facility discovered an underground tunnel at the prison's block D, the sources said. The wing, which is vacant, was being renovated when the tunnel, measuring 3 meters in length and 1 meter in height, was discovered, the sources said on condition of anonymity. The tunnel would have led outside the prison had work on it continued, they said. Military Judge Danny al-Zeini has launched a probe into the incident. All precautionary measures to fill in the tunnel have been taken, the security sources added. Tuesday's incident was the most recent in a series of attempted escapes from the country's largest prison. In January, authorities found ropes dangling from a guard tower as well as a passage that prisoners planned to use as part of an escape attempt. A month earlier, security sources said police thwarted an escape attempt by a group of roughly 20 inmates suspected of belonging to Fatah al-Islam. — *The Daily Star*

Gunman wounds Fatah member in Ain al-Hilweh

SIDON, LEBANON: An unidentified man shot a member of Fatah and fled the scene in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ain al-Hilweh Tuesday, security sources told *The Daily Star*. Sources said a masked man shot Fatah member Walid Yassine in the legs in what appeared to be a personal dispute. Yassine was transported to the Al-Nidaa al-Insani Hospital to receive treatment. Palestinian security personnel deployed in the area to prevent the violence from spreading. The camp has seen a series of violent clashes recently, following the influx of Palestinian refugees from Syrian camps. Palestinian officials have expressed concern that the fighting in Syria could erupt inside Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps, adding that they have taken several measures to contain any tensions. — *The Daily Star*

Sleiman hails pope's resignation as courageous

BEIRUT: President Michel Sleiman hailed Pope Benedict XVI for his decision to retire from his post, a statement by the president's press office said Tuesday. "The courageous and wise decision of the pope to step down at such a time sets the right example for spiritual dignitaries on maintaining the strength of the [Christian] posts," Sleiman said. The 85-year-old Benedict told a group of cardinals in a speech in Latin Monday that he would step down on Feb. 28 because he could no longer fulfill his duties in a fast-changing world. The pope is the first to resign in more than 600 years. Sleiman compared the pope's decision to that of former Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir, who stepped down in 2011, also for age reasons. The president also said the Lebanese people would miss the pope and hoped the country remained in the pontiff's heart. During a historic visit to Lebanon in September, Benedict XVI prayed for peace reconciliation and interreligious harmony in the Levant region. — *The Daily Star*

Belgian speaker voices keenness for stable Lebanon

BEIRUT: President of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives Andre Flahaut stressed his country's concern for Lebanon's stability and unity while also expressing his government's desire to reinforce diplomatic cooperation between the two countries, the Central News Agency reported Tuesday. Flahaut, who arrived in Lebanon Monday on an official visit, met with President Michel Sleiman and briefed him on his tour of the Belgian contingent in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon. Sleiman thanked Flahaut for his country's contribution to UNIFIL and expressed hope that this participation would continue. Later, Flahaut met with Speaker Nabih Berri and Foreign Minister Adnan Mansour in Ain al-Tineh and signed a partnership protocol between the parliaments of the two countries. Berri saluted the Belgian government's hospitality for the Lebanese community in Belgium and thanked Flahaut for personally "campaigning to extend the mandate of Belgian participation in UNIFIL and the role he played in the issuing of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701." — *The Daily Star*

INTERVIEW

Palestinian refugees' hardships intensify

More funding needed to finish Nahr al-Bared reconstruction, help the displaced from Syria

By Annie Slemrod
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: The war in Syria has compounded what was already an emergency situation for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. UNRWA's top official in the country said Tuesday.

Veteran diplomat Ann Dismorr took up the position of director of UNRWA affairs last October, when only a few thousand Palestinian refugees had fled Syria for Lebanon. Since then, as violence hit the area in and around Damascus and broke into Yarmouk — Syria's largest camp — the number of Palestinians crossing the border has soared.

As of a few weeks ago, UNRWA had recorded some 20,000 Syrian-Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. As it rolls out a cash distribution program this week, Dismorr says more accurate figures will become available, and "it could be around 24,000."

"We are facing a humanitarian emergency," Dismorr states unequivocally. Although the agency has dealt with crises before — in 2007 nearly all of Nahr al-Bared's residents were

uprooted when the Lebanese Army laid siege to the northern camp to root out militants from the Islamist group Fatah al-Islam — Dismorr notes that this displacement is different largely because of uncertainty.

"We don't know if some [Palestinians from Syria] will [go] back, or how long they will be coming for," she says, noting that she still considers Nahr al-Bared an emergency situation, given that thousands of people have still not been able to return home.

"Nahr al-Bared is something we really need to carry on focusing on. So in that sense, we have two emergencies to deal with," she says.

According to Dismorr, 22 percent of those displaced from the camp will return in May, but \$165 million is still needed to complete reconstruction. The former Swedish ambassador to Lebanon sees a link between solutions for the two crises.

"I'm hoping that if we can only step up the reconstruction in Nahr al-Bared, that will ease the congestion and the overcrowdedness in Beddawi," a nearby refugee camp.

Lack of space is not only a challenge in Beddawi, and given the influx of more refugees to camps desperately short on space, the UNRWA head names accommodation as the most pressing problem.

She says the agency has searched for any buildings that are "underused, since



Dismorr: "We are facing a humanitarian emergency."

there [are] barely any unused buildings in the camps." The agency is renovating some structures — even equipping storage spaces with toilets and showers — so that they can house families.

But many Palestinian refugees from Syria complain that the agency is unresponsive to their plight, and that they are finding it difficult to access its services. One way UNRWA is countering these accusations is through occasional cash handouts, such as the one it is now carrying out at 13 locations across the country.

All recorded families are eligible for \$130, plus \$20 per person. These handouts are intended for housing and clothing, and they will also enable UNRWA to update its newly digitized

lists of Syrian-Palestinians in Lebanon.

Although some refugees have reported difficulties enrolling with UNRWA here, Dismorr says those who left Syria without papers can be confirmed with UNRWA Syria "within a day."

The cash distributions are also an opportunity to reach out to those refugees who have not made it to UNRWA or have other concerns. UNRWA has created small cards with numbers to call, urging newly arrived Palestinians to contact UNRWA so they can receive its help, and Dismorr says General Security agents will now be distributing them at the border. These cards and other information pamphlets are also being handed out in communities and with aid.

UNRWA also gave out cash aid in late December, but Dismorr says "we can't call [the distributions] regular because then we would just assume that the funding would be there, and we can never assume that ... We really have to keep the emergency alert up all the time."

Funding is a persistent problem for UNRWA, and after a December appeal the agency received \$6 million. "We need several more million [dollars], but the problem is that before Christmas we estimated the number [of Palestinian refugees from Syria] to be 20,000," Dismorr says, suggesting that the numbers will likely have to be adjusted upward.

"But it is very important in one way or another to support the [Palestinian] Syrian refugees because most of them arrive with nothing," she says.

"The little savings they have will be spent very quickly because the overwhelming majority don't have a job or are restricted" by Lebanon's laws on the type of employment Palestinians can seek.

The differences in life in prewar Syria and Lebanon now are stark: As a Palestinian in Syria, "you have an integrated job market, you can own your house, you can be a civil servant ... there are different conditions ... and a different cost of living."

Most refugees in Lebanon, Dismorr says, are now relying on the kindness of families and friends.

Syrian refugee diseases, infections on the rise

By Stephen Dockery
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: A disfiguring and tough to treat boil and several other sanitary health problems are on the rise among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, as hundreds of thousands seek shelter in increasingly difficult conditions and only half have access to medical care.

Lebanese officials have reported several cases of tuberculosis and Hepatitis A in Syrian refugee areas. The aid organization Medecins Sans Frontieres has treated cases of lice, scabies and the skin disease leishmaniasis, said its Head of Mission Fabio Forgiione.

"We have seen an increase in certain diseases related to overcrowding and poor living conditions," he said.

Particularly worrisome to the aid workers is leishmaniasis, which currently cannot be treated because the needed drugs are not available.

The skin infection usually spreads through a parasite in a sandfly and begins as a small boil that grows several sizes before it bursts, leaving a disfiguring indented scar.

The infection initially sparked concerns of leprosy, which caused boils resembling those of the affliction. Forgiione said MSF was working on importing the required drugs for the 16 patients the organization was caring for.

So far most of the diseases are treatable if aid workers can reach the refugees, and there isn't a risk of a mass outbreak.

"We are not witnessing any extremely worrying kinds of outbreaks; most of the diseases are related to living conditions," Forgiione said.

The increase in health problems comes as the United Nations struggles to help over 265,000 refugees and reach many more people who have yet to seek aid. Despite the U.N. registering nearly 50,000 refugees a month, according to U.N. reports, the number of unregistered refugees continues to increase while their living conditions decline. Aid and government officials also estimate that there are between 50,000 and 100,000 refugees in the country who remain unregistered.

Most refugees now live in alternative shelters and housing, many of

which are not insulated from the cold, and lack running water and sanitary facilities. Aid workers in the Bekaa Valley say sanitary conditions are noticeably worse than several months ago, and recent surveys back up their claims.

A report issued this week by MSF warns of dire and worsening conditions for refugees in the country based on a statistical survey of refugee households. The findings are stark: 50 percent of refugees are not getting the needed medical treatment because of cost and 33 percent of people have been forced to stop treatment for a health condition because of the expense. More than 12 people are often sharing a single room, the report found, some people could not afford drinking water and in several areas the majority of refugees reported receiving no aid at all.

"It remains too expensive and too difficult for many among these populations in distress to access essential medications, children's vaccinations, prenatal and obstetric care or medical management of chronic conditions," the report said.

Much of the health work is currently done through the World Health Organization and the Health Ministry, which works with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. But the funding on the government side has begun to dwindle, and ministers say unless they receive a large influx of foreign aid they will not be able to meet health needs. The government has launched a \$180 million appeal for funds to expand its aid operations and take control of aid work in the country, which includes \$75 million for the Health Ministry.

Making the treatment of disease more problematic is the distribution of refugees in Lebanon. The job and low income housing markets quickly became saturated in the east and north of the country near Syria, causing refugees to head to the west and south in search of work and affordable housing.

Syrian refugees in Jordan and Turkey are mostly concentrated in camps where humanitarian organizations operate aid hubs.

Without camps in Lebanon, aid workers have to spread out to reach refugees in the cities of Sidon, Tyre, Arsal, Tripoli and every village, town and tent community in between.



"We will not keep quiet," read banners held by protesters outside the Egyptian Embassy in Beirut.

Activists decry sexual violence in Egypt, region

By Olivia Alabaster
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: As part of a global day of action against sexual violence in Egypt, dozens of activists gathered Tuesday evening outside the Egyptian Embassy in Beirut, but for protesters the event was about more than just Tahrir Square.

The widespread public anger which led to the toppling of former President Hosni Mubarak two years ago has not died, and as disappointment in the new government has increased, so too has the frequency of protests, and with that a spike in reported sexual attacks against women demonstrators.

On the second anniversary of the start of the revolution on Jan. 25, 19 separate sexual attacks were reported in Tahrir Square alone, one in which a woman was even penetrated with a bladed weapon.

In the face of government inaction, civil society groups such as Tahrir

Bodyguard and Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment have emerged to help women have the freedom to protest.

Organized by the Uprising of Women in the Arab World, activists met in 35 cities including Sydney, New York, Yerevan and Ramallah to decry what they called a depressing phenomenon, and the apparent lack of intention on the part of the authorities to do anything to stop it.

Using a lyric from iconic Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum, the largest banner in Beirut read "Patience has limits" with the addition "From Egypt to Lebanon, our bodies are one."

Sara Sbeity, 25, was there to stand up to what she labeled "sexual terrorism."

"We want women in Egypt to know that we support them, but this is also a message to patriarchal governments across the Middle East that we will not stay silent."

In terms of Lebanon, Sbeity called for the introduction of a civil personal status code, citing existing Article 522, which allows men convicted of rape to

have their sentence commuted if they marry their victim.

For Layla, 26, the protest was about more than just sexual violence, as she believes that is part of a system in which women are also denied equal rights in education, the law and religion.

"We need to be treated as equal citizens. This is a message to all governments, to the Salafists, to the opposition movements, to everyone."

Samira Moukaddam, 51, attended the protest as she believes the current Egyptian government is deliberately neglecting the issue of sexual violence in Tahrir Square to dissuade women protesters from taking part.

"Even the previous regime didn't use that weapon to the same extent," she continued, "as supporters of the revolution, we have to support all of the actors, and the actresses, behind that struggle."

The Egyptian people, Moukaddam added, are an inspiration to the entire region. "They are all sacrificing so much — rape, torture, it's beyond comprehension," she said.

Canine company Dog rides shotgun as farmer transports food for livestock in Bekaa Valley



A farmer, accompanied by his dog, drives a tractor to transport food for his livestock in the Bekaa Valley village of Riyaq Tuesday.

AGENDA

Cabinet meeting

Presidential Palace, Baabda
Feb. 13, 10 a.m.
President Michel Sleiman will chair a Cabinet meeting during which the ministers will discuss 66 items on the agenda topped by the report of the Department of Consultation and Legislation on the formation of the supervisory committee for elections and the transfer of telecommunications data from the Telecommunications Ministry to security agencies.

In Memory of Rafik Hariri

The Rafik Hariri memorial, BCD
Feb. 13, 4 p.m.
The Future Movement's Beirut Committee will hold a ceremony in memory of the late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri to mark the anniversary of his assassination. Afterward, the youth movement of the party will hold a ceremony to honor "Students of Rafik Hariri" at the American University of Beirut.