

# Funding shortage fuels credibility gap over Nahr al-Bared

*Reconstruction pledges remain mostly talk*

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## Year in Review

BEIRUT: More than one year after the end of the Lebanese Armed Forces' (LAF) three-month conflict with Fatah al-Islam militants at the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp, faltering fundraising efforts are haunting the first baby steps of reconstruction, while security services blame Fatah al-Islam for two deadly bombings in Tripoli this year and the whereabouts of the group's leaders remain unclear.

The three-month conflict in mid-2007 left the camp - formerly home to an official population of about 31,000 - a mostly uninhabitable jumble of perforated concrete. Some 168 LAF soldiers, more than 220 militants and more than 20 civilians died in the 15 weeks of fighting, while more than 200 indicted militants remain in custody and continue to await trial for their involvement.

The battle also catapulted the then-commander of the LAF, General Michel Sleiman, into the political sphere, buoyed by widespread public support for the LAF during the fighting; in May this year Parliament elected him president after the post had remained empty for six months as the country's deeply polarized major political camps were incapable of filling the office.

Fatah al-Islam also apparently stayed active this year, as Lebanese security forces say the group was behind two major bombings in Tripoli targeting LAF soldiers and this month planned to pack cars with explosives for attacks on the LAF or UN peacekeepers.

Four soldiers and three civilians were killed as an explosion tore through a military bus in Tripoli on September 29. In an earlier, deadlier attack, a bomb detonated next to a bus carrying mostly LAF troops during the morning rush hour on August 13 on Bank Street in Tripoli, killing at least 18 people and wounding at least 40. Most of those killed were soldiers.

Fatah al-Islam evidently continues to pose a serious security threat in Lebanon, as two weeks ago security forces searched for two cars rigged with explosives for attacks likely to be aimed at LAF troops or UN peacekeepers. A senior security source said the cars were somewhere inside Sidon's Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp and could cause heavy casualties.

The plot demonstrated that Fatah al-Islam wants to retaliate for recent arrests of group members and for the pressure on its new leader in Lebanon, Abdel-Rahman "Abu Mohammad" Awad, who has been forced to live as a fugitive inside Ain al-Hilweh, the source added.

The LAF has repeatedly asked Palestinian security forces to hand over the fugitive militant, who has links to Al-Qaeda and is wanted also in Syria, but he has not been arrested, apparently due to concerns that his capture could destabilize the delicate security situation inside the camp. Other reports say Awad has fled Ain al-Hilweh, the largest and most volatile of Lebanon's dozen refugee camps.

Meanwhile, Shaker al-Abssi, who led Fatah al-Islam during the 2007 fighting, was reported on an Islamist website this month to have been killed in Syria, although the reports remain unconfirmed. The website report said Abssi was "probably" killed as he and two of his associates were targeted in an ambush by Syrian anti-terrorism officers in the Syrian town of Jermana while the militants were on their way to meet fighters linked with the insurgency in Iraq.

Lebanese security forces believe Abssi, before sneaking into Syria, spent several months in Lebanon after the battle in Nahr al-Bared ended in early September 2007. Security forces have arrested several individuals accused of helping him escape - including the man who said to have smuggled Abssi over the border - but have been unable to confirm persistent rumors that Abssi is in jail in Syria.

Regardless of Abssi's fate, Syrian officials have said that Fatah al-Islam was responsible for a September 27 car bombing in Damascus. In November, a group of captured Fatah al-Islam militants - including Abssi's daughter Wafa - were paraded on Syrian state television to present "confessions" admitting guilt in the September attack and naming Awad as the group's new leader.

In addition, the suspects also said they had received money from the Future Movement of parliamentary majority leader Saad Hariri, but analysts in Lebanon questioned the credibility of the broadcast, saying the Syrians brought out the suspects to put pressure on their political enemies in Lebanon.

Lebanese authorities, meanwhile, have yet to begin trials of any of the more than 200 Fatah al-Islam militants arrested in mid-2007; in addition to the two bombings in Tripoli this year, officials have also said Fatah al-Islam was behind the twin bus bombings in Ain Alaq in February 2007.

As for the Nahr al-Bared camp, UN officials in October this year began clearing the rubble from the hardest-hit area of the camp, although donors have contributed less than 10 percent of the \$445 million price tag to rebuild the camp.

Prime Minister Fouad Siniora led a donor conference in Vienna on June 23 to raise funds for the reconstruction of the camp and of six surrounding Lebanese communities, but the pledges he spoke of then have yet to materialize.

Siniora said in Vienna that Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait would cover half of the \$445 million rebuilding bill, but not one of the Gulf states has uttered a word since then backing Siniora's promise.

Arab countries in general this year heard frequent criticism from some Palestinians and Nahr al-Bared refugees over their lack of financial support. As the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) - which counts six Middle East states among its members - gorged on oil revenues expected to top \$1 trillion for 2008, the vast majority of the funding received by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for the reconstruction has come from Western countries. UN officials have said, however, that they hoped Arab nations to reveal some pledges in the near future.

Siniora also said at the conference that donors had pledged \$122 million for the rebuilding, but UNRWA said this month it had received only about \$40 million of that amount. The Finance Ministry said on its website in July that pledges totaled \$113 million.

The ministry bulletin listed the US as the top donor with a pledge of \$22 million, followed by the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development with \$15 million, the European Commission with \$12 million, Palestine and Spain each with \$10 million, Germany with \$9 million, Italy with \$7.5 million and Canada, Oman and the OPEC Fund with \$5 million each. Some money has already arrived, such as smaller amounts from South Korea, Iceland, Malta and the Czech Republic.

UNRWA says it has enough money to complete the rebuilding of two of the camp's eight sectors. The two sectors should accommodate some 1,000 housing units for the camp's registered population of 5,449 families. Each of the eight sectors undergoing reconstruction will require between \$15 and \$20 million for the entire rebuilding process.

The reconstruction process will last at least until April 2011, and UNRWA officials have said the length of the project would allow donors to spread out their contributions, blunting the sticker shock of the rebuilding price tag, which works out to about \$90,000 per family.

After the initial flood of donations during the conflict for humanitarian aid for the displaced, the rebuilding and relief campaigns have since this summer settled into a pattern where donor funding is continuously only sufficient for a handful of months into the future. For example, finances for the first step of the reconstruction - removing the debris of buildings ruined during the battle - will run out next spring.

Like the rebuilding drive, donations for relief assistance for the camp's former residents have been a fraction of the requested amounts.

UNRWA in early September launched a funding drive for \$42.7 million in relief money to provide for the camp's inhabitants from September through the end of 2009, but less than \$10 million has been pledged. The European Commission announced a \$2.74 million contribution this month; other donors for the relief effort include the United States (\$4.3 million), the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (\$1 million), Italy (\$562,000), Norway (\$500,000) and Germany (\$492,000).

Because of the funding shortfall, UNRWA cut the monthly rental subsidy for displaced families from \$200 to \$150 with the November subsidy, which was paid out in mid-December along with the December allowance. The rental subsidies, which UNRWA had previously disbursed in \$600 quarterly amounts, make up about 60 percent of the \$42.7 million appeal. More than half of the camp's 5,449 registered families collect the rental support.

Although no verified figure exists for the number of camp residents who have returned to live in the less-damaged areas at the outer edge of the camp nearest to the coastal highway, UNRWA says more than 11,000 of the camp's original residents are living there again.

Another roughly 1,500 families are residing in temporary accommodation, including in about 570 prefabricated, six-meter-by-three-meter metal housing units thrown up by UNRWA in the outer area of the camp.

For the residents, life remains difficult. Economic life is slowly returning to the camp, which had been one of the country's better-off refugee communities before the conflict. Children still attend school in shifts, with one group going in the morning and another in the afternoon.

Many Nahr al-Bared residents, however, say they still believe the camp will not be rebuilt, said Yasser Dawoud, head of the Lebanese non-governmental organization Development Action without Borders, known to camp residents by its Arabic acronym, NABAA.

After refugee camps such as Beirut's Tal al-Zaatar were razed during the Civil War and never rebuilt, many Palestinians continue not to trust the Lebanese state, Dawoud added.

"It's something that is stuck in the people's minds," he said. "They still think that it's just a promise. They think most of the money will be used for the surrounding [Lebanese] villages."