

Report warns against delaying Nahr al-Bared rebuilding

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BEIRUT: The International Development Research Center (IDRC) issued a report Monday that highlighted how fragile recent reconciliation between the Lebanese government and the Palestinians in Lebanon was and what needs to be done to see it improve. The report, titled "Building a Better Relationship," stressed the importance of international donors in this reconciliation process, particularly in the rebuilding of the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp. The report said the trust of the Palestinian-Lebanese relationship hinged on its reconstruction.

Written by a political science professor from McGill University, Rex Brynen, the IDRC report said that the future of the relationship between the Palestinians and the Lebanese government was still uncertain, but if it succeeded the resulting stability would be positive for all parties involved, including the international community.

"Put simply, appropriate donor engagement on this issue could pay substantial future dividends: for the social and economic conditions of the refugees, for Lebanon's own development, and for local, regional and even global security and stability," said the report.

The report fits into the larger issue of the treatment and status of over 250,000 Palestinians who live in Lebanon after they were forced out of Palestine in 1948 and 1967.

Most Palestinians in Lebanon live in one of 12 refugee camps administered by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Pressing issues in the Palestinian relationship include Palestinians' inability to own land, limits on employment, resettlement in Lebanon, and the issue of arms and militias inside and outside refugee camps.

The Palestinian-Lebanese relationship since 1970, when the Palestinian Liberation Organization was forced out of Jordan and came to Beirut, has been one characterized by mistrust and violence. Both sides have blamed each other for lack of stability in their communities.

The relationship of the two communities has noticeably improved in recent years. The Lebanese government created the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC) in 2005 to improve the quality of quality of life of Palestinians and in 2006 Palestinian Ambassador Abbas Zaki issued a statement of apology for any harm done to Lebanon.

But this delicate relationship was strained again in 2007 after the fighting around Tripoli in the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp. Nahr al-Barid was destroyed in May 2007, after members of the radical Islam al-Fatah organization took over the camp and the Lebanese Army waged a three-month long battle to regain control of the area. The fighting left more than 400 people dead and over 1,000 wounded, and reduced much of the refugee camp to rubble.

he IDRC report said the rebuilding of the camp is crucial in stabilizing the Palestinian-Lebanese relationship and stopping radical organizations like Islam-al Fatah from continuing to thrive in the refugee camps.

So far, according to the report, only \$67.3 million has been donated to rebuild the camp, a quarter of the funding required. Failure to rebuild the camp could lead to a lack of trust between both communities, said the report.

The report calls for international donors to give more to the reconstruction as the Palestinian issue is also part of broader issues, and the resolving of this issue could benefit international donors regionally

According to UNRWA, 53 percent of Lebanon's Palestinian refugees are living inside of refugee camps.

That is the highest percentage of countries with Palestinians still in camps, compared to Syria's 27 percent and Jordan's 12 percent.

"An estimated half of all Palestinian refugee households in Lebanon live below the poverty line," said the report.