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## ***Syrian Refugees Struggle Amid Aid Cuts, Lack of Labor Rights***

**By The Associated Press**

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SALHIYEH, Jordan — A Syrian refugee couple and their baby boy were recently dropped from a U.N. food voucher program and live on \$9-a-day jobs on a peach farm in northern Jordan. In a town nearby, a 16-year-old boy quit school to work as a mechanic's helper because his refugee family needs the extra \$21 a week.

With the Syria conflict in its fifth year, the struggle for survival is getting tougher for many of the close to 4 million Syrians who fled to neighboring countries, particularly those in Jordan and Lebanon, where the highest number of refugees have settled.

There appears to be no quick and practical way to halt the downward slide.

International plans for easing the humanitarian crisis are severely underfunded because of rising need and competing demands from other hotspots. At a Syria conference in March, donors committed to paying less than half of the \$8.4 billion requested by aid agencies and governments for 2015. Of that sum, \$4.5 billion is earmarked for helping refugees and the countries that host them, but so far only one-fifth of the money has been received.

The funding gaps have already forced a 30 percent cut in U.N. [food aid](#) this year and put thousands more families on waiting lists for cash assistance. The reductions are pushing more refugees, including children, into low-wage informal jobs and into competition with unskilled local workers, particularly in Jordan and Lebanon, where unemployment rates have soared.

Aid officials warn the refugees' deteriorating living conditions are bound to foster extremism in an already war-battered region struggling with the spread of Islamic militancy. In appealing for more funding, the head of the U.N. refugee agency, Antonio Guterres, said the situation is "utterly unsustainable."

As the Syrian conflict grinds on, refugee labor rights are increasingly becoming a hot-button issue.

U.N. agencies maintain refugees should have the right to work in host countries, to protect them from exploitation and to help them become self-reliant. The International Labor Organization has proposed that countries like Jordan and Lebanon allow refugees to work legally in jobs typically filled by migrant workers, such as construction and agriculture.

"The longer this crisis persists, the longer the Syrians are in these host communities and the less they are getting assistance, the more they will need to work," said Mary Kawar of the ILO regional office in Beirut.

Yet Jordan and Lebanon balk at suggestions they integrate more Syrians into the formal labor force.

"Do we actually open up the economy for the refugees so then we increase significantly the unemployment rates of Jordanian citizens and their poverty levels?" Jordanian Planning Minister Imad Fakhoury said when asked recently about putting more Syrians to work legally. "That's not acceptable. From a Jordanian perspective, the priority has to be our citizens first."

In Jordan and Lebanon, large numbers of Syrian refugees work without permits, usually for far less than what local residents would accept, driving down wages across the board for unskilled labor.

Unemployment has risen sharply since the start of the Syrian refugee influx in 2011 — from 11 percent to 25 percent in Lebanon and from 14.5 to 22 percent in the northern and central districts of Jordan where three-quarters of the refugees live.

Lebanon tries to clamp down on illegal Syrian workers, but only has limited means to do so, said Social Affairs Minister Rashid Derbas. International donors have promised money for putting more Syrians to work, but "we haven't received anything," he said.

Labor rights are less of an issue in Iraq and Egypt, which have taken in smaller numbers of refugees, and in Turkey, which has a more robust economy.

The U.N. refugee agency said it's aware of the difficulties in Jordan and Lebanon. "We recognize that some countries neighboring Syria are creaking under the strain of hosting so many refugees, and their own populations may feel refugees are competing for scarce jobs," agency spokeswoman Ariane Rummery said.

Donors and aid agencies agree that more money needs to be spent on helping communities that absorb the refugees because the dramatic influx has overwhelmed local services.

In the Jordanian district of Mafraq, which borders Syria, 40 percent of the half-million residents are refugees. Schools are so overcrowded that most operate in two shifts. Garbage collection has doubled to 200 tons a day, and the growing demand for housing has doubled and tripled rents, pricing many Jordanians out of the market, said local governor Qassem Nhaidat.

The 2015 aid appeal for Syrian refugees sets aside nearly 30 percent of funding for development programs in host countries. But appeals have been underfunded in the past, and Rummery acknowledged that if that continues, key programs would have to be scaled back and others might not get off the ground.

Across the region, underfunded U.N. agencies have cut services.

The World Food Program reduced the number of Syrian refugees eligible for food vouchers from 1.9 million to 1.7 million in January to focus on the neediest. Since then, it has twice reduced benefits, most recently in May by a total of about 30 percent, and the neediest among more than 520,000 refugees living outside camps in Jordan now receive just \$21 per person per month.

"The uncertainty is draining for everyone," said WFP spokeswoman Joelle Eid. "We are unable to look refugee fathers and mothers in the eye and tell them we don't know whether they will be getting assistance in June, July and August."

Since the first round of cuts, parents have taken 45,000 more children out of school, either to put them to work or because it's cheaper to keep them home, she said.

One of those who quit school is Majed Hayeh, the mechanic's helper who lives in the northern Jordanian city of Mafraq. He dropped out after seventh grade and would like to return to school, but said that's even more unlikely now that his family's food vouchers were reduced. He and his 20-year-old brother, who works in construction, have to feed a family of six, with their biggest expense the monthly rent of \$250.

Some 20 miles (30 kilometers) to the east, Faleh al-Oun employs 70 Syrian refugees on his 162-acre peach, apricot and nectarine farm. Last year, local authorities started rounding up undocumented Syrian workers, but farmers banded together in protest and managed to halt the campaign, the 45-year-old said. "It would have been a disaster if they moved all the Syrians," he said, noting that not enough Jordanians are willing to work on farms.

He buses some workers in from the Zaatari refugee camp, which has some 85,000 residents, some 25 kilometers (15 miles) away. Guards often look the other way when residents sneak out for jobs, said refugees Ahmed Qablawi, 50, and Abdel Rahman Attiyeh, 37.

On a recent morning, the two were pruning peach trees on al-Oun's farm ahead of the harvest. They said they needed the income because food vouchers aren't enough to live on, even in the camp, where most services are free.

Other refugee farmhands live in shacks and tents pitched on a field.

Fatmeh Ahmed, 20, shares a rent-free shack with her 25-year-old husband, Abdel-Qahhar, and their 10-month-old son, Hassan. The couple started out as migrant workers in Jordan, but settled on the farm after the outbreak of the Syria conflict.

They used to get refugee food vouchers worth about \$100 a month from the World Food Program, but were cut earlier this year, in part because they have jobs and a teenage relative also pitches in, the U.N. agency said. The couple has appealed the decision, saying they need the vouchers to survive.

The WFP said a family living next door, headed by a woman, gets food and cash assistance.

Analysts say it will be difficult to come up with a realistic long-term solution to the refugee crisis.

"On the one hand, there is a shortage of money," said **Benedetta Berti**, a regional security expert at the **Institute for National Security Studies** in Israel. "On the other hand, there is reluctance by local governments to transition from seeing and thinking about the refugee crisis as a temporary emergency situation to a more long-term situation that requires integration."

"The vast majority of the investments need to be about long-term integration, because there is no other way, and that requires labor rights," she said.

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Associated Press writers Bassem Mroue in Beirut and Mohammed Daraghme in Ramallah, West Bank, contributed to this report.

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