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## **Lebanon. Father Karam (Caritas): “We’re on the edge of a precipice. We need help. Reverberate the cries of the people!”**

“Since past October, that is, since the outbreak of mass protests in Lebanon, 262 restaurants shut down in the capital Beirut alone, and some 20,000 teachers in private schools, many of them Catholic, are at risk of being fired because families can't afford to pay tuition. State schools, for their part, can't accept any more pupils, also because of the great number of Syrian and Iraqi refugee students. Banks have imposed capital controls on private accounts, including those of foreigners, setting a limit to cash withdrawals.

People are standing on line outside of banks and ATMs. Money transfers abroad are virtually impossible, resulting in a shortage of imported goods, especially medicines”: it's the dramatic picture coming from Lebanese sources in Beirut, contacted by SIR. “Lebanon, the third most indebted country in the world, is virtually on the edge of a precipice” and the reassurances of the Governor of the Lebanese Central Bank, Riad Salameh, don't seem convincing enough.

“Businesses operating abroad are shutting down. Some companies have cut their working hours to 5 hours a week to avoid redundancies. In anticipation of a worst-case scenario, people are stocking up on basic necessities. The power supply is interrupted in many areas of the capital by sudden blackouts. People are lining up at gas stations.”



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The economic crisis also affects migrant workers from Africa and Asia: some 200,000 people from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Ethiopia and the Philippines. In the last few days there has been news of many Filipino women leaving Lebanon, mostly domestic workers, who took advantage of the free

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repatriations offered by their embassy. An estimated 1,500 women are expected to return to the Philippines in the coming months.

**The commitment of Caritas Lebanon.** Reports also arrived from Caritas Lebanon. "What is happening in our country, with the protests that broke out on 17 October last year - Father Paul Karam, director of the local Caritas, told SIR - is the result of a series of problems that have been dragging on for decades and that now undermine people's lives including their daily sustenance. That is why people - of all faiths, ethnic groups and political positions - have taken to the streets." Despite the repression by security authorities. Protesters reported a disproportionate use of force and the infiltration of external elements to de-legitimize the protests.



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["The cry of the people is still loud, the protests have not subsided."](#)

["The Lebanese people - the priest pointed out - continue fighting against injustice and corruption. They demand jobs, housing, school and health services, respect for fundamental rights, a sustainable future and, above all, to end corruption and to start judicial proceedings against those charged with corruption and of embezzling public funds. This stolen money must return to the people so they may justly benefit from it." "The protests are the result of three decades of mismanagement that began with the Taif Accords \(October 1989\) signed to end the civil war in Lebanon \(1975-1990\). Since then, a succession of governments has been marked by corruption and cronyism, focusing on their personal gain or their centre of power rather than on the good of the country and the people", the](#)

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priest said.

**Poverty on the rise.** On top of this, approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees have entered Lebanon since 2011. It is estimated that one third of Lebanon's population is now made up of refugees. The reception and solidarity they received was commended by Pope Francis on 9 January in his speech to the Diplomatic Corps. "We deeply appreciated the Pope's words - said Father Karam – but economic difficulties are now affecting everyone." It is also for this reason that Caritas Lebanon, assisted by other Caritas, especially Caritas Italy, "is doing everything possible to meet the needs of the local population and refugees. For some time already, our projects have included ever greater contributions for the Lebanese people." The statistics speak for themselves:

"before 2011 6.5% of the overall population was below the poverty line, but now they amount to over 39.5%; unemployment went from 6% to 36%. This figure escalated after the outbreak of the protests. Many people have lost their jobs as a result of the closing of factories and shops, with an estimated 50% unemployment rate."

"Poverty increased in parallel with food prices. As Caritas Lebanon, we are at the forefront of assisting the most vulnerable. During this Christmas season we distributed more than 600 food parcels to vulnerable families. The minimum monthly wage is currently less than 300 Euros, one and a half million inhabitants live on a monthly income of approximately €108 (about €3.5 per day).

**Request for help.** The Caritas President points the finger at those responsible for fuelling tensions and wars in the Middle East and in particular in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, as seen in the events of the past few days. "We bear the consequences on our own skin," Father Karam loudly remarked, "world leaders argue with each other, while the weakest, the most vulnerable, are paying the price of their disputations.

Lebanon can no longer afford to pay for wars waged by others on our borders.

We count on the support of Pope Francis and the international community," he added. Lebanon today needs help." In a message, released on 8 January at the end of the monthly meeting, the Maronite Church urged Lebanese politicians to do everything possible to bolster Lebanon's national cohesion and protect the country from the new winds of war that are looming over the entire region. "The Church in Lebanon, also thanks to Caritas, has always championed equality, rights and social justice for all. The Church has embraced the cries coming from the streets and is supporting them in national and international fora."

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