

Business

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10 Crisis lays bare poverty in Geneva, as thousands queue for free food**11** Musk threatens removing Tesla from California**11** Britain's gardeners dig for victory as virus takes toll

A US military vehicle patrols the oil fields in the town of Qahtaniyah in Syria's northeastern Hasakeh province near the Turkish border. Around 5.6 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey had scraped by on meager daily wages but now find even that is denied them as the coronavirus pandemic forces their host countries into shutdown. — AFP

Syrian refugees starve amid lockdowns, job losses

Lockdowns in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey prevent many working

BEIRUT: Ahmad Al-Mostafa can't afford milk for his baby daughter. A Syrian refugee, he has barely been able to feed his family since Lebanon sank into economic crisis last year. But now, a coronavirus lockdown has made things even worse. "Nobody will hire us anymore," said the 28-year-old, who lost his restaurant job a few months ago. He racked up hundreds of dollars in debt at the local minimarket getting food before the owner said he could borrow no more. "We're afraid of tomorrow," he said. "We don't know what will happen to us."

His plight echoes that facing many of the 5.6 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, who had scraped by on meager daily wages but now find even that is denied them as the coronavirus pandemic forces their host countries into shutdown. Many Lebanese have themselves been hit by a financial crisis that has evaporated jobs and sent prices soaring, and have become less tolerant of the Syrians who have boosted the population by around 1.5 million to some 6 million.

'They don't hire Syrians'

"Every time I go looking for work, they tell me they don't hire Syrians," said Mostafa, who fled into north Lebanon in 2014. "I'm sitting indoors - and

everything is expensive." He can no longer afford diapers, which have doubled in price, and he relies on a charitable neighbor who gets milk for his one-year-old daughter. More refugees say they are worried about starving than about the virus, said Mireille Girard, representative of the UN refugee



Financial crisis compounds Lebanon woes

agency UNHCR in Lebanon.

In a survey last month, UNHCR found 70 percent were going hungry, while many could not buy soap. Since Syria's war erupted nine years ago, many have languished in crowded camps where aid workers fear any COVID-19 outbreak would be rapid and lethal.

up for long-term rental. "Since the beginning of the summer of 2018, it was fully booked via Airbnb, almost exclusively by foreign tourists," the 32-year-old woman said, but "100 percent of the reservations for April, May and June have been cancelled". Being unemployed, she had no other choice.

"I was counting on the earnings of this apartment, around 1,000 euros per month, to compensate for the loss of my job," she explained, expressing pessimism about the summer season, which the Greek government is hoping to jumpstart on July 1. Long-term rentals are becoming "a major trend", according to Patrick Tkatschenko, a real estate agent in Athens. "Airbnb is suffering a huge blow," he said.

Airbnb slashes staff but will adapt

The "hard hit" American home-sharing platform announced on Tuesday that it will slash a quarter of its work force—some 1,900 people all around the world. "We are collectively living through the most harrowing crisis of our lifetime," Airbnb co-founder and chief executive Brian Chesky said in a blog post. This year the San Francisco-based company's revenue will be "less than the half" of the 2019 figure, and Chesky admits he doesn't know when the tourists will return.

Still there are many who believe that holiday apartments, rather than hotels, have a future, as safe havens away from the crowds. Enrique Alcantara,

'Not a single penny'

In Jordan, the Zaatari camp, home to 80,000 Syrian refugees, has been closed off by the authorities during a two-month lockdown, meaning those who used to go out to work on farms every day can no longer do so.

Jordan hosts some 900,000 refugees in all, most of whom live outside the camps. Abdullah Aba Zaid, who used to get work picking tomatoes, has had no income for two months. "For the last 10 days, I haven't had a single penny in the house even to pay for bread. I am borrowing from here and there," he said. "Everyone is waiting for God's mercy ... hoping things will improve."

But even as businesses return to work after the government eased curbs this week, job losses are on the rise, making more Syrians dependent on already strained aid efforts. UNHCR is getting more calls for help from refugee families who had been largely self-reliant, said Dominik Bartsch, its Jordan representative. Some Syrians said their accumulating debts had forced them to sell UN food coupons to pay for rent and basic goods.

'Everyone is hungry'

Since Turkey's economy tipped into a brief

recession two years ago, the public mood towards Syrians has soured, with some saying they have driven down wages and taken jobs from locals. Many of the three and a half million Syrian refugees work as day laborers in construction and manufacturing, especially textile factories - sectors that have been hard hit by the pandemic curbs.

Unlike millions of Turkish workers who lost their wages, Syrians do not benefit from government aid packages but can apply for food aid from local municipalities. Still, many have no basic protection against the virus. One in five does not have access to clean water, said Omar Kadkoy of the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV). "This brings the issue to an alarming level and the government should be acting to contain it."

In a camp in Lebanon's Bekaa valley, which authorities have sealed off during the lockdown, Younes Hamdou cannot find bread. Clean water is also scarce, illness rife and social distancing nearly impossible. "We are prisoners ... We have no immunity because of the lack of food," he said. "Lebanese people have gone hungry, Syrians have gone hungry. Everyone is hungry." — Reuters

Pandemic a major blow for Airbnb

ATHENS/SAN FRANCISCO: At the foot of the Acropolis hill, in the touristic Koukaki district, the coronavirus lockdown has silenced the sound of Airbnb customers' wheeled luggage. The tourist industry in Athens, as in many other European capitals, has ground to a halt, with planes grounded and restaurants, museums and archaeological monuments all closed. This has left a huge hole in the Greek economy which had been recovering from a decade of crisis.

Owners of small apartments in Koukaki, who had been renting them on the Airbnb platform in order to provide income during the financial crisis, are once again struggling. "The reservations stopped abruptly," laments Romina Tsitou, an Airbnb host since 2014. "I hope I won't have to put them for long-term rental, but I may have to if this situation drags on," she adds. For the time being her two Airbnb apartments accommodate medical staff.

Stefania Dimitroula has already put her apartment

president of Apartur, the holiday apartment owners' federation in Barcelona, foresees a 85 percent drop in sales revenue for 2020. He predicts though that holiday apartments "are going to adapt more easily to the new times that lie ahead, to the new needs of the tourists, mainly as far as security is concerned".

In Athens too, despite the staggering drop in holiday reservations, there remains a glimmer of hope. "Tourists will benefit from private apartments in order to feel more secure in comparison with hotels where they will have to interact with more people," Stratos Paradias, president of the Greek Federation of Property Owners and of the International Union of Property Owners, told AFP.

He also thinks apartments that manage to stay in the short-term rental market will bounce back "faster than elsewhere" because "Greece is considered one of the safe countries thanks to the way it has handled the COVID-19 pandemic".

Holding fast to short-term rentals

In Barcelona, Sybille Campagne's holiday letting calendar is empty. "For July-August, all reservations were cancelled," the 43-year-old French woman explains. Nevertheless she isn't considering taking her apartment off the Airbnb platform because it accounts for 80 percent of all her reservations. Juan Quilis, a 35-year-old telecom technician who owns an apartment in Seville, is also sticking with short-



ATHENS: People pass by "For rent" signs on a pole in the Koukaki district in Athens. Directly hit, the dozens of small landlords who had chosen to rent their property on Airbnb to compensate for the declines in income and revive neighborhoods hit by austerity. — AFP

term rentals for the time being. "I'm not too worried for now, because I have a savings cushion but if I see that things don't come around, I will put my apartment in long term rental. As a last resort." In France, Airbnb expects to see its reservations come back swiftly thanks to its local clientele, with the French particularly fond of staycations. Aurelien Perol, Airbnb director of communication in France, expects last-minute reservations to rise as lockdowns are lifted. — AFP