

Palestine Refugees Today



No. 127



Back to school

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Cover photos: front and back: Palestine refugee students in the West Bank on their return to school after months of enforced school closures. Photos on covers and pp. 6-7 by Mounir Nasr of UNRWA. Photos on pp. 3-4 by George Nehmeh of UNRWA

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Ramallah's pioneer mothers

IT IS mid-morning at UNRWA's Ramallah Women's Training Centre and groups of students are taking a break between classes on the lawn of the centre's olive-tree-shaded campus on a hilltop in the West Bank.

One group, sitting in a circle, is making a joyful fuss over one of the campus's newest attractions—a giggling, wriggling seven-month-old child wearing a lacy white sun bonnet.

One of the women in the circle—like the others a student at the centre—is the child's mother. Others in the group are clearly about to become mothers themselves.

This recent scene at the 28-year-old Ramallah women's centre represents nothing less than a social phenomenon. Married women, young mothers and mothers-to-be are among the Palestine refugee women who recently re-enrolled at "RWTC" when it re-opened after a two-year forced closure. They are pioneers in women's education in the Middle East.

The Ramallah Women's Training Centre has always been a pioneering institution. It was the first boarding college of its kind for women in the Arab World. Since it opened in 1962 it has introduced courses and teaching concepts that have been adopted by other women's community colleges in the area.

The new ground being broken by the women at RWTC today is a direct consequence of the *intifada*—the nearly three-year-old Palestinian uprising in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Like other institutions of higher learning in the West Bank, RWTC was closed for more than two years following the start of the *intifada* in December 1987. During that time its 700 women students went back to their homes and families in the occupied territories—40 per cent of them are from the Gaza Strip, the rest from the West Bank.

Some of the women, while not knowing from day to day if or when the centre might reopen, took short-term jobs: as seamstresses, secretaries, nursery school teachers, assistant pharmacists or hairdress-



On the RWTC campus, summer 1990

ers—in the fields in which they were training when their studies were interrupted.

Others took short-term practical courses—in sewing, typing, computers, first-aid or health education, hairdressing, even in Hebrew.

And some of them did what Palestinian women their age (20–22) normally do when they are not enrolled in college: they got married and started raising families.

And, when RWTC reopened in April 1990, 92 of these married women came back to campus as second-year students. And 10 of the 154 women accepted as first-year students were also married.

More than half of the married second-year students had already had a child or were pregnant—or indeed had had one child and were expecting a second—when they returned to classes. In all 40 children were born to RWTC students during the hiatus and 25 women were pregnant when they returned in April.

This has created a unique situation for the centre. Indeed, it is probably unique in all the Arab world to have married women—already mothers or expectant mothers—attending classes at a junior boarding college.

The normal pattern in this part

of the world is for women to finish their higher education before getting married—even though many women are already engaged by the time they start college or university. In the past, at RWTC as at other institutions, if a woman chose to get married, she usually left school. Married women in college were virtually unknown; pregnant women in college were unheard of.

One of the married students who returned to the centre with a child in tow is 23-year-old I'timad, a second-year student in the dress-making course who's married to a lawyer and whose son, Na'amán, was born in December 1989.

"The *intifada* has changed many of the customs which the community traditionally imposed on women," I'timad explained in an interview. "I came to the centre in order to pursue my studies and get a college certificate. These certificates have become a 'weapon' aiding women in their lives. In view of the difficult economic situation we are facing, I need to work in order to help my husband, and to ensure a decent life for our children."

The students and staff of RWTC have adapted themselves to their new situation. The centre's administration had to change the rules to admit married women. Students get

time off to deliver their babies and then they return as quickly as possible—sometimes after only a few days—to resume their studies.

A few of the married women with children, including I'timad, have taken rooms with families in the Ramallah area so they can be near their children. Some of them have brought family members—a mother-in-law or sister-in-law—to the area to look after the children during the day while the mothers are in class; others take their children to kindergartens run by local charitable societies during the day.

Most of RWTC's mothers, however, are not so lucky as to have their children nearby. They have had to leave their babies behind, at home in villages or camps in the West Bank and Gaza, to be looked after by their mothers or sisters or their husbands' families. They travel home at weekends to see their children.

These women feel torn between their studies and the need they feel to be near their new babies; not to be able to breastfeed their children or to be with them all the hours of the day as they feel they should be is a considerable sacrifice.

"This phenomenon reflects the great desire and determination on the part of these young women to pursue their higher education," says RWTC's Principal, Mrs. Lamis Alami.

One particularly courageous student, who is training to be a teacher, travels home every evening to the Gaza Strip (120 kilometres away and a journey requiring several stages in shared taxis) just to be with her child for a few hours. Then she studies into the night and makes the two- or three-hour return trip—always subject to delays by curfews or military checkpoints—to the centre early the next morning.

Some of the students, once married, had to overcome the resistance of their new husbands to the idea of their returning to classes. But in other cases, the parents of some of the women made the parents of the would-be bridegroom agree—as a condition before the marriage could go ahead—that their daughter would be allowed to resume her studies once the centre reopened after her marriage.

"This reflects a significant change in attitude towards the role



Two of the married RWTC students with their babies in Ramallah

women are expected to play in our society," says Mrs. Alami. "It also reflects a change in the attitude of their community. Without the support of their husbands and families, who are looking after their children, this would have been a very difficult task for these young women."

Most of all, says Mrs. Alami, "we now have a landmark against which to measure social change

since the start of the intifada." The instructors at RWTC see this as one indication of the sacrifices which young Palestinians are prepared to make in their daily lives. Traditional social concepts are being subordinated to practical matters such as pursuing an education in the face of great challenges.

Once again, the Palestinian women of Ramallah are pioneers.

Two refugees: a reminiscence

Editor's Note: UNRWA's commemoration this year of the 40th anniversary of its service to Palestine refugees has prompted the following reminiscence by Mr. Raymond Courvoisier, a former UNRWA Field Director in Lebanon (1950-57) and Gaza (1958-61). Mr. Courvoisier, a Swiss national now retired in Spain, also served from 1961-69 as UNRWA representative in Europe. In the following reminiscence, written for Palestine Refugees Today, he recalls two particularly memorable Palestine refugees whom he met during his UNRWA career.

'Fatmeh'

IT WAS in 1973, in Amman, capital of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, that I first met Fatmeh, a young Palestine refugee who was then 27 years old.

Born in Jaffa in 1946, she was an only daughter and lived with her parents in a small house on the seaside. Her father was a foreman in a brick factory.

Fatmeh would experience from 1948 onwards the terrible tribulations endured by the inhabitants of Palestine. Hundreds of thousands would leave the Holy Land to escape from the violence of the continuous and deadly fighting between Arabs and Jews.

Fatmeh and her family moved to Gaza where they lived in a tent. No bed, no blanket, hardly anything to eat. For months, the only

food the little girl would receive was a portion of soup distributed daily by the American Quakers.

In the autumn of 1956, the Gaza Strip was occupied. Fatmeh's father decided to seek refuge in a safer place. It was the start of a long exodus which took them to Hebron, Bethlehem and finally Jericho, the city of palm trees, where they found a shelter and UNRWA's assistance.

Fatmeh finished her secondary education and was admitted at the head of her schoolmates to the vocational training centre where she graduated as a nurse's aide, with special distinction and two prizes.

In 1967, Fatmeh lost her father—killed during the Arab-Israeli war. A new and tragic exodus began for the Gaza refugees. They headed for Amman and found refuge in emergency camps in Jordan.

The young and pretty Fatmeh lost everything; she felt crushed by the terrible weight of uncertainty and moral misery she sensed among the desperate people around her. But her unshakeable courage drove her to continue her paramedical studies in Amman.

When I met her by chance in 1973, she had just received from the hands of His Majesty King Hussein an award for outstanding services, at a ceremony where I was the King's guest.

Fatmeh told me: "We, Palestinians, belong nowhere. We came from the Holy Land, but where do we go now? Where shall we find, one day, a real home? Are we condemned to live in exile?"

"Now you are a Chief Nurse, Fatmeh," I said. "Your heroism during the fighting was exemplary. The sick, the disabled, the children whom you care for with love, even at the risk of your life, look up to you with expectation and gratitude. Are you happy?"

With tears in her eyes, Fatmeh answered me: "I have nothing left but God".



1949: At first the refugees lived in tents...

Continued on page 8



1949: At first the refugees lived in tents...



Learning to learn again

Palestinian schoolchildren in the Israeli-occupied West Bank 40,000 refugee children who attend UNRWA schools—spent out of their classrooms as in them during the first 32 months of the Palestinian uprising in the Occupied Territory.

All schools—and institutes of higher learning—in the West Bank closed by the Israeli authorities at the start of the uprising. Gaza Strip were also closed at the outset but were allowed to stages earlier than in the West Bank—although with continuing curfews and selective punitive closures of individual schools.

For West Bank teachers and students, there were motion, uncertainty and enforced idleness. The second semester of the 1987–88 school year was compressed into two months in 1988–89 school year had a false 10-day start around the end of August. The pupils only got going again in earnest round the end of July 1989, only until mid-November 1989. The 1989–90 school year began in January 1990 and ran only for 24 weeks (instead of 36), a third of the teaching time was lost.

UNRWA's efforts to get the school year extended—schools—or to provide alternative education in the form of kits—were blocked by the authorities. And certain schools, such as the Tulkarm camp, West Bank, were closed as a punishment for periods beyond the comprehensive closures.

When the pupils finally did go back to their classroom: much as a year and a half behind in their curricula. UNRWA formulated crash programmes to try and compensate for the lost time. But the pupils—particularly the younger ones without experience of school—basically had to learn how to learn once again. These photos show, that provoked a variety of reactions ranging from bewilderment to







Learning to learn again

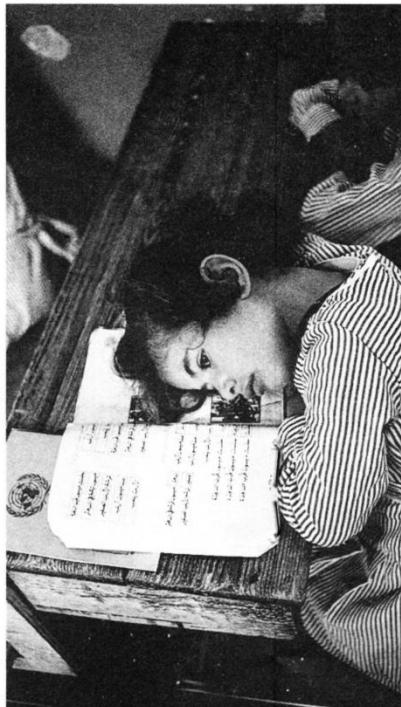
Palestinian schoolchildren in the Israeli-occupied West Bank—including the 40,000 refugee children who attend UNRWA schools—spent as much time out of their classrooms as in them during the first 32 months of the intifada, the Palestinian uprising in the Occupied Territory.

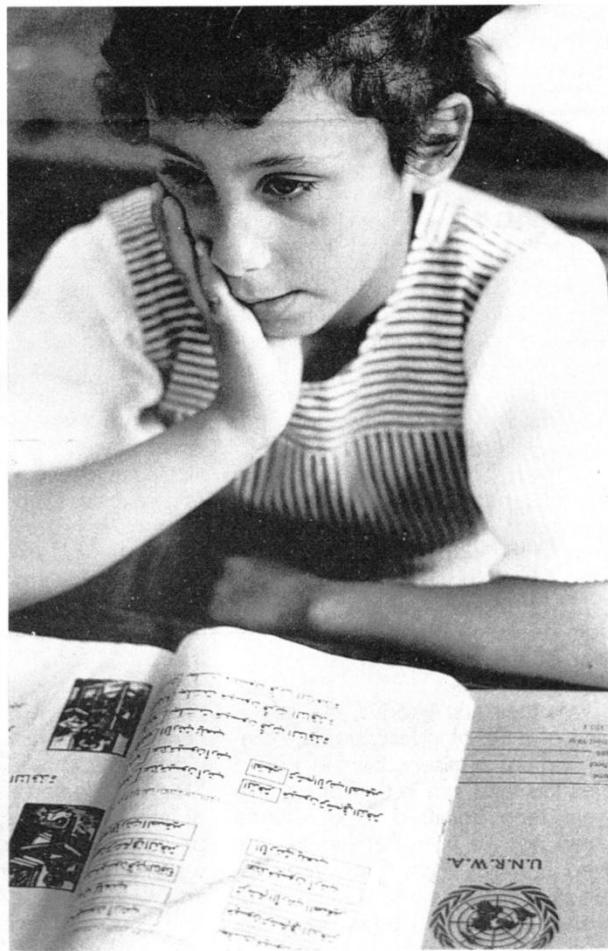
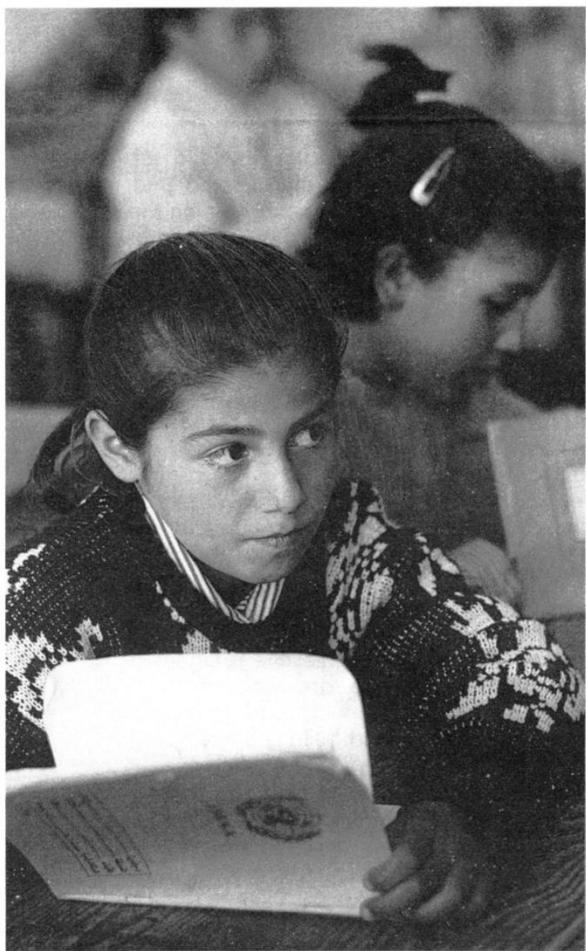
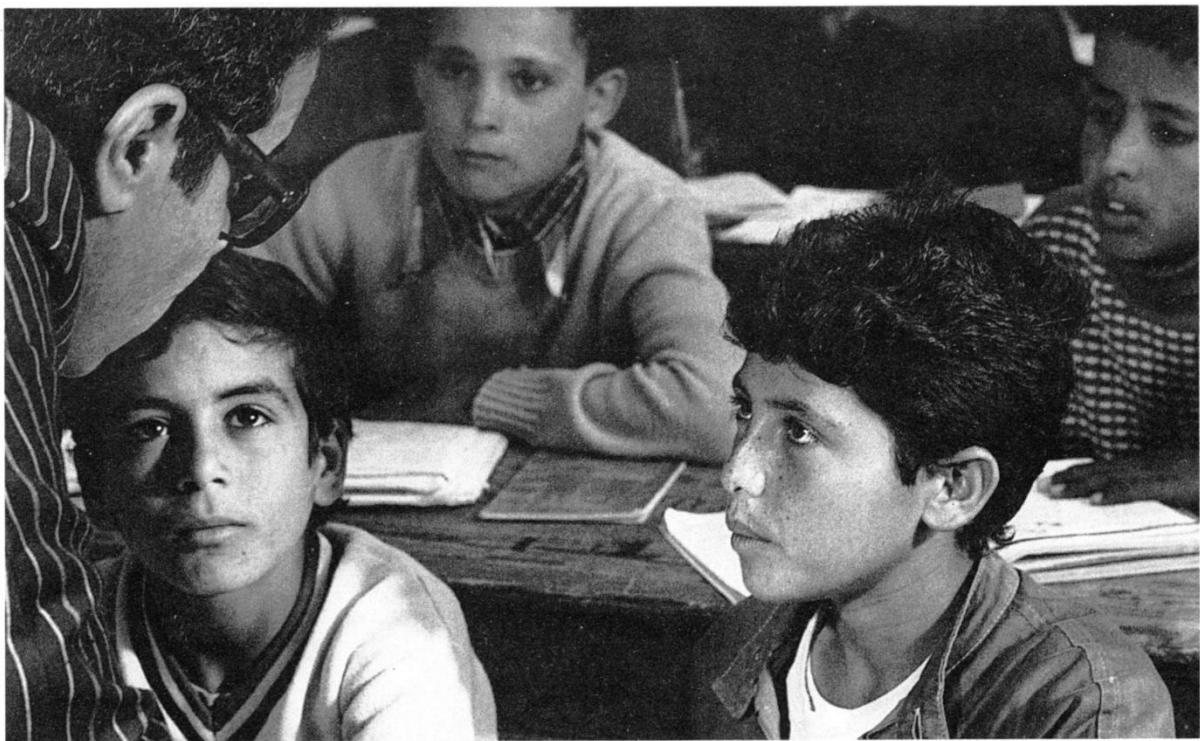
All schools—and institutes of higher learning—in the West Bank were closed by the Israeli authorities at the start of the uprising. (Schools in the Gaza Strip were also closed at the outset but were allowed to re-open in stages earlier than in the West Bank—although with continuing disruption by curfews and selective punitive closures of individual schools.)

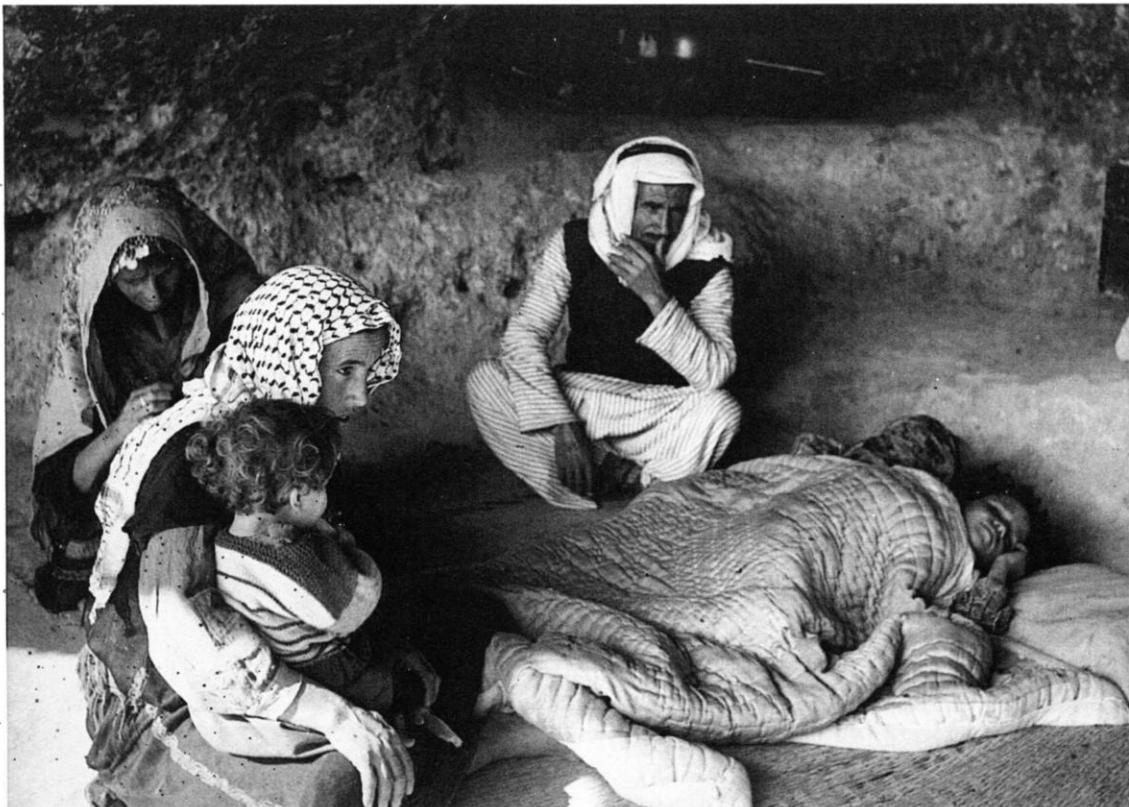
For West Bank teachers and students, there were months of disruption, uncertainty and enforced idleness. The second semester of the 1987–88 school year was compressed into two months in mid-1987. The 1988–89 school year had a false 10-day start around the end of 1988 and only got going again in earnest round the end of July 1989, continuing only until mid-November 1989. The 1989–90 school year didn't start until January 1990 and ran only for 24 weeks (instead of 36), meaning that a third of the teaching time was lost.

UNRWA's efforts to get the school year extended in Agency schools—or to provide alternative education in the form of home-learning kits—were blocked by the authorities. And certain schools, such as those in Tulkarm camp, West Bank, were closed as a punishment for extended periods beyond the comprehensive closures.

When the pupils finally did go back to their classrooms, they were as much as a year and a half behind in their curricula. UNRWA educators formulated crash programmes to try and compensate for the lost study time. But the pupils—particularly the younger ones without much experience of school—basically had to learn how to learn once again. And, as these photos show, that provoked a variety of reactions—from exhilaration to bewilderment!







... or in caves

Continued from page 5

'Michael'

It was in 1974 that I met Michael. He was 25 years old. It was also in Amman, in Jordan, where he lived in a refugee camp with his parents. A bright young man, with an engineering diploma, he spoke fluent English, French, Swedish and, naturally, Arabic.

"I was born in a cave, hewn in the rock, near the place where the shepherds saw the star which led them to the birthplace of the Son of God," he told me.

"My parents were refugees from Beersheba which they left for fear of the events that were happening in various parts of Palestine. It was their first exodus, the beginning of a life of indescribable, painful and unjust misery. Born in 1949, I was the third son in the family. We were then admitted to a refugee camp not far from Bethlehem. We lived in a tent, then, a few years later, in a shelter with no furniture or water. We had to fetch the water from a hundred metres away. We

had no toilet and we had to use public latrines installed in the camp. In winter, with the cold and the snow, it was dreadful."

"I finished my studies when I was 18 and was the first of my year. Very serious events spread fear among the refugee population and led to a massive rush of 240,000 Palestinians towards Jordan. We were part of that huge wave, a vast herd of human beings moving elsewhere. It was the second exodus imposed on us, although we never harmed anyone. I am shattered, we have lost everything and are practically naked."

"As a student, I was a burden on my parents and I wanted to help them. My father and my brothers worked occasionally. I got a diploma from UNRWA's training centre and, as luck was on my side, I won a scholarship to study in Stockholm where, after two years of intensive studies, I graduated as an engineer. The following winter, I went back to Amman but my parents were dead, broken by poverty and sickness and the hardships they had endured."

"I later found a job in Kuwait where my diploma and my knowledge opened for me the doors of a multinational concern where I am now Assistant Director."

I asked Michael: "And what are you going to do now? What do you expect from the future after so many painful tribulations?"

Michael replied: "Above all, I remain a Palestinian. I have two wishes: the first, to see my people have a land they can call their own, a land which is not stolen from someone else, and where my countrymen will no longer be a hunted and miserable herd. The second wish is to see an end to the relentlessness with which some seek to present the Palestine refugees as terrorists. We are tens of thousands who work abroad to help our families and build a future."

"Tell me Michael," I asked, "you the young, the orphans, the refugees, what do you most hope for?"

Michael took my hands in his and said to me, looking straight into my eyes: "What we all hope for is that peace prevails among men and that the sun lights our way."

Dreams, horizons and reflections

Editor's Note: UNRWA runs programmes, but UNRWA's programmes are basically about people. People like those described here, who attend centres for the disabled in Jordan. And people like Janet Cross, a Quaker volunteer from England who is on a two-year assignment with UNRWA, working at the community centres for the disabled at Baqa'a, Jerash, Suf and Husn camps in Jordan. She wrote the following article for Palestine Refugees Today.

IF YOU are a refugee, far from your homeland, dreams assume a great importance. Those who came to Baqa'a camp, Jordan, from the occupied territory of the West Bank in 1967 retain a rose-coloured picture of their old homes and their dream is that one day they will return. That is why they live in "emergency camps" in Jordan, but give their addresses as Nablus or Hebron in the West Bank.

Often these dreams are passed on to and through their children. Sons will be needed to help to turn dreams into reality, daughters will preserve and strengthen the family unit. So there must be many children and often mothers go on childbearing long after their age and health make it wise to do so.

Intisar had six children and lost two more in their infancy. Then for some years no more appeared and she was delighted when at last she found herself pregnant again. This would be her last child, her special one, the child of her advancing age and her dreams.

Ahla ("Dreams") was born with cerebral palsy. Her left side is completely useless and she will never be able to walk. Until the Disabled Centre opened, Ahla's mother did everything for her, carrying her around, feeding and dressing her.

Ahla has been at the Centre since it opened in 1988. She is now 6½ years old, a bright, intelligent girl with a cheerful personality and ready smile. She is learning to read and write, can paint and sew, dress

and feed herself; she fills the Centre with her sunshine and lively chatter. We hope soon to have a wheelchair to increase her mobility.

We thank Ahla for the happiness she spreads wherever she goes. She is everybody's dream child.

Widening horizons

Poliomyelitis is one of the commonest causes of physical disability in Jordan. Until recently children who contracted this disease emerged doubly handicapped. They could not walk and therefore they could not go to school. There are probably hundreds of young people lying at home without even the consolation of literacy, merely because they have no means of getting out and an overstretched educational system has neither time nor money to spend on home tuition.

Among Palestine refugees this situation is rapidly changing as more centres for the disabled are being opened by UNRWA. At Baqa'a we have three such young polio victims. Together with others suffering from muscular dystrophy or other crippling physical diseases they form an adult literacy class.

Huda, Mariam and Ismail came to us barely able to write their own names. They are now beginning to read and write fluently and also to acquire basic numeracy. At the Centre they can also form friendships, make music, have fun. We have fitted them with calipers and surgical boots. Mariam walks with crutches and the other two have their own wheelchairs.

Now their horizons are widening further. At the Centre we are making an activity room where they can do woodwork, cooking and weaving, and the girls take weekly lessons in knitting and flower arrangement at the newly opened Baqa'a Women's Centre.

Moreover, Al Hussein Society for the Rehabilitation of the Physically Handicapped has graciously consented to our using their hydrotherapy pool in Amman once a week, and here they have discov-



Exercise is a key to overcoming disability



Exercise is a key to overcoming disability

ered that a person who cannot walk is not thereby prevented from swimming. The warm waters of the pool act as a gentle stimulant to paralysed limbs, and the joy of moving independently in a new element gives renewed confidence.

These young people are bright, happy and full of potential and we are thankful that with UNRWA's help they can now look to the future with confidence.

Reflections

Murad looked at his reflection in the mirror for the first time. He put out his hand tentatively to touch the cold glass, then looked quizzically from my reflection to my real face. He bent forward to give himself a kiss, then chuckled deeply.

When I first knew Murad just over a year ago he did nothing but lie on his back, banging his head. It was impossible to hold his interest, even to make eye contact. We propped him in a chair and offered him toys, all of which were swept on to the floor. There was a slight response to a teddy bear. "Mama," said Murad.

The first breakthrough came when some of the boys were playing with toy cars. Murad rolled one across the table. I caught it and rolled it back. He did the same. When I failed to stop the car and it fell on the floor we heard the deep chuckle for the first time.

Gradually Murad became more mobile. He loved to be placed on his tummy on a trolley and I showed him how to work it with his arms. At first he could only travel backwards but in time he learned to steer in all directions. Much later he tried to stand and now he staggers between the parallel bars reaching out for me and smiling broadly.

He makes a lot of happy noises but can only say two words: "Mama" and "Ana". He cannot concentrate but will play spasmodically with musical toys, xylophones and bells. Books and pictures mean nothing to him and his eyes glaze over when anyone tries to hold his attention. But daily we see progress and find new hope.

Murad suffered brain damage following a severe fever with epilepsy at ten months old. He is now just seven years old. If I were to compare his achievements with



Treatment, attention—and determination—give disabled refugees the strength to stand on their own

those of my three-year-old grandson or with the "average milestones" charts in the children's manuals I would easily lose heart and think his progress negligible. But when I hear that deep chuckle, signifying some new discovery about the world around, my heart leaps with pride for Murad.

Cause for rejoicing

The UNRWA-run Community Centre for the Disabled at Husn camp in Jordan also had special cause for rejoicing recently. Not just one but three of its children learned to walk, and achieved those first few precious steps on their own.

Mahmoud was born in 1973 with cerebral palsy which affected his legs. Throughout his childhood, he lay on a mattress at home, growing steadily fatter. UNRWA gave him a wheelchair which made him mobile but did not solve the problem.

Eventually, Annie Synnott, a British volunteer who worked with the

disabled in Jordan until 1989, and the Husn physiotherapist, Rahma Hussein Balawneh, persuaded his mother to let him go with them to Al Hussein Society in Amman for assessment, and an operation was recommended. This took place at the Princess Basma Hospital in Irbid and Mahmoud then attended the Husn centre for physiotherapy.

Rahma realized that the first problem to be tackled was his weight. When this had been reduced, she began an intensive daily half-hour programme of exercises to strengthen and straighten Mahmoud's legs. He progressed well until he was able to stand, first with support and then without. More physiotherapy followed including walking exercises. Now Mahmoud can go everywhere with crutches and he has given his wheelchair back to the centre.

Murad is three years old and comes from Irbid. He has Downs Syndrome and cerebral palsy. The muscles in his thighs were wasted and he could not stand. His first exercises were done in a crouching



Treatment, attention—and determination—give disabled refugees the strength to stand on their own

position, but as the muscles strengthened he was slowly brought into an upright standing position. Then he had to learn to stand and balance without support. At first he was always toppling over, but gradually he gained the confidence to stand alone and then to take a few steps using a walking frame. Now he no longer needs the frame. He can walk unaided.

Iyad first came to Husn Centre in 1987 at the age of 3½. He too has cerebral palsy which affected his balance. His whole body shook badly and his thighs were especially wobbly. The priority here was to encourage a good standing position before attempting to teach him to walk.

The physiotherapist had to have endless patience, for he tired easily and cried with pain and frustration when put through the necessary programme of exercises. Iyad's mother was very cooperative and repeated his daily programme at home. At first there was little progress and physiotherapy sessions often ended in tears as he tried to control his shaking limbs. But his teachers persevered and at last Iyad also was able to take his first steps alone. Now he is walking happily and he hopes to begin mainstream schooling next term.

These three stories give us hope that other children who come to UNRWA-run centres for the disabled may also be led towards the independence that comes with mobility.

The ability to walk is something that most of us take for granted. When I was eighteen, I was involved in a road accident, and after nearly a year in bed, I had to learn to walk again. It was an incredibly painful and difficult task and many times I was tempted to give up trying. It was several months before I had sufficient confidence to go out without support.

Because of this experience I probably appreciate more than most people the miracle that happens when a person who has never walked learns to do so for the first time. It is a miracle achieved through pain and perseverance. We thank God and at the same time applaud the diligence of the person concerned and the hard work of physiotherapists, teachers and parents.



Chronic disability has failed to ruin the life of 10-year-old Mohammad Ghaleb Hussein, a pupil at UNRWA's Safad school in Damascus. Mohammad is from a refugee family originally from the Safad area of Palestine. His father left school after the elementary level and worked as a dishwasher and waiter in Damascus to help his father, a farm labourer, care for their large family. The eight people in Mohammad's immediate family live in a three-room shelter on the slopes of Mount Qassiyoun in the Syrian capital, where Mohammad shares a tiny room with five brothers and sisters.

The family's limited income does not comfortably cover their basic living costs, and UNRWA helps pay for medical treatment for Mohammad, who has malformed feet and a condition, enuresis, which makes him incontinent. Two operations to remove a mass at the base of his spine have failed, but his teachers describe Mohammad as a lively child "with the seemingly boundless energy of boys his age". He is an eager and diligent student and does well in school, despite frequent classroom interruptions due to his condition. The boy is shy but determined to succeed. Asked about his hopes for the future, Mohammad says without hesitation that he will become a teacher—*inshallah*—with help from UNRWA.





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