



**Palestine  
Refugees  
Today**

NO. 132



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# Palestine Refugees Today



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## A path to hope

**A group of neatly dressed young girls are quietly working in a special home in Tulkarm town on the edge of the invisible line which divides West Bank from Israel proper.**

Among them are three young girls with short hair, colourful dresses and sad faces. Fadia, Rula and Leila (not their real names) are sisters, three of the 13 girls who live at the "Beit Fatayat" home. The home is one of several established by Dr. Francis Azraq in 1988 to care for Palestinian children with severe behavioural problems.

Now in their teens, the three young girls were born to a family of refugees from Shu'fat camp. They spent their childhood in the difficult environment of the camp and had a history of family problems. Ten years ago, their parents decided to separate because life in the family had become almost unbearable. "Our father was zero," says Fadia, the eldest among the three. "And our family life was a catastrophe."

Fadia grew up feeling overwhelmed by her problems. As a result, she totally rejected authority and showed a complete lack of interest in her studies. Her aggressive behaviour got her into frequent fights. She and her sisters suffered because of rejection and abandonment by their mother. When a new bride entered the house, they knew that things could only get worse.

Through a social worker who knew of Dr. Azraq's programme, the three sisters were able to begin a new life at the "Beit Fatayat" home two years ago. It proved very different from the stark and troubled existence in the camp. Life at the home provides warmth and peace for the 13 girls who live there with five social workers selected and trained by Dr. Azraq.

### **A new initiative**

Dr. Azraq, a Palestinian from Jerusalem with a Ph.D in psychotherapy from the University of Paris, and Dr. Viveca Hazboun, an

American-born Palestinian with a Ph.D in psychiatry from the University of San Francisco, are responsible for UNRWA's mental health programme in the West Bank.

Launched by UNRWA's Health Department in early 1991 with WHO funding, the mental health programme is one of the Agency's newest and most innovative programmes. Through intensive psychotherapy, the programme aims to provide specialist medical care to Palestine refugees. The programme is now entirely funded and managed by UNRWA.

### **Solving problems**

"The situation under which Palestinian society is developing can create severe problems of antisocial behaviour at times," says Dr. Azraq. "We are faced with problems of drug abuse, severe depression, pervasive developmental retardation, aggressive behaviour and post-traumatic symptoms. These arise from a number of causes including the underlying atmosphere of violence which Palestinian children and adults have to cope with every day of their lives. This is compounded by family problems and divorces which occur in every society."

Each day Dr. Azraq and Dr. Hazboun visit a different UNRWA clinic in the refugee camps. UNRWA's social workers and other medical and educational staff usually refer cases to the doctors. "Love is the major concept we are trying to introduce. We are trying to abolish physical punishment."

When looking at the case of an aggressive child, Dr. Azraq points out that the child is trying to communicate - to talk - through his or her act of aggression. By using love and by letting this aggressive power come out through words, the

aggression can be controlled. Language development is also very important, particularly through fairy tales. "Metaphors such as fairy tales play an important role in our lives, and we reach that part of ourselves through language," says Dr. Azraq.

"Girls often express aggressive feelings in different ways from boys, but there is the same refusal of authority and running away from their situation. In this society, similar behaviour by boys and girls is interpreted differently. Often the female gets punished even when she is the victim of an act of aggression."

### **Discovering hope**

The most important result of the intensive psychotherapy carried out through the UNRWA mental health project and at the homes supervised by Dr. Azraq in Tulkarm, is that many refugee children who are undergoing treatment have acquired a new sense of hope. A girl from Shu'fat camp announced that she wants to become a lawyer "to defend my people and their rights." A teenager from Tulkarm camp hopes to "become a social worker to help other children as unlucky in life as I was."

An 11 year old boy from Kalandia recently came to the therapy with severe speech disturbances. "He was an enfant-loup," says Dr. Azraq. "Every time he entered the clinic he hid under the desk. He was almost completely non-verbal." Now the boy is going to school and has started pronouncing a few simple words. When Dr. Azraq asked him his favourite school subject, he answered "the alphabet".

*Tulkarm refugee camp, West Bank*



## Giving women credit - a grass roots approach

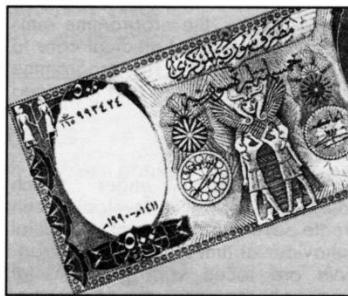
**The new bank has accomplished much more than helping five woman to buy new sewing machines. It has given new confidence to everyone involved in the project.**

THE town of Qabr Essit, better known as Saydeh Zeinab, is named after the grand-daughter of the prophet Mohammad. Her tomb in the town is located in a magnificent mosque full of Islamic art and precious ornaments. One of the gates is encrusted with gold. About 15 kilometres from Damascus, Qabr Essit refugee camp, located near the town of the same name, is home for about 10,000 Palestine refugees. A refugee camp may sound an unlikely location for an innovative experiment in women's banking, but that is exactly what has happened.

The banking idea emerged when a group of women trainees in the Women's Programme Centre (WPC) in the camp made a profit of LS 23,000 from the sales of artificial flowers, bridal crowns and knitted goods which they had made during their training course. Without clear guidelines on how the co-operative's profits should be used, the women designated half the profit to purchase a new knitting machine for trainees at the Women's Programme Centre.

Qabr Essit WPC is one of six in the Damascus area. The primary activity at the Centre, financed by UNRWA, is an 11 month sewing course for about 25 women. After careful thought, the women decided to use the other half of the profit from their sales to provide loans to help needy women purchase a sewing machine for home use so that they could generate their own income.

The women set up their own loan committee which included four trainees, an instructor and two representatives from the community. They defined the primary aim of the programme as helping "women in special circumstances" generate an income in order to help support their families. They prepared a plan of action and drew up some simple loan guidelines.



- Loan applicants are to pay part of the cost of the machine themselves.
- The committee will supervise and recommend the best method of purchasing the machine.
- The committee will determine the dates and amounts when the loan instalments will be repaid. It will also ensure that the necessary loan guarantees for repaying the loan are obtained.
- The deadline for final repayment of the current loans would be the end of the training course - July 1992.
- The committee rejected charging interest, but is looking at ways to ensure that the purchasing power of the loans will be maintained after the first loans are repaid.

The committee received applications, made a loan priority list and checked with merchants in the camp to ensure that the applicants could buy their machines at competitive prices. Eventually, five women were selected. All five have received

their loans and purchased their sewing machines.

"We are very happy to have this modest banking system. It has made my dream of helping my family financially come true," said Muna Sulaiman, a trainee at the WPC. "We have agreed to repay the cost of the sewing machine in seven instalments to the WPC "Bank." I will repay all the debt by July 1992 when the sewing course ends."

Asked about how the project was working so far, Mrs. Samiha Qadour, the WPC Supervisor said, "The five trainees will now be able to work in their own homes to help earn their living," something they would not have been able to do without the new bank. She spoke beside a busy class of 40 women practising hairdressing and in the next room ten women were learning to knit sweaters for themselves and for sale on the new knitting machine. "The basic idea behind the WPCs is to give an opportunity for refugee women and girls who have left school to learn some useful skills," Mrs Qadour explained.

*Angela Williams, UNRWA Director of Relief and Social Services, has undertaken to match any funds raised in other UNRWA Women's Programme Centres for use in similar community banking initiatives to the extent that resources permit.*

The Women's Community Bank is only one example of how UNRWA's 63 WPCs are helping women to meet one another. "We want these centres to be a meeting place for generating new ideas for refugee women and girls," said Raja Sulaiman, the Women's Programme Instructor at Qabr Essit camp.

Cont. page 10



TIN cans, brown earth and scattered garbage are common sights in many poor neighbourhoods. In this one, they are put to good use as a grazing ground for goats. And as a play area. Boys, oblivious to their grazing companions, play soccer amidst the array of earth, rubbish and stone.

Because this was not a pastoral landscape, but only a block away from the bustle of Amman, the conflicting images were riveting – an early indication of the pragmatic waste-not attitudes shaping the lives of the people who live here. This was the outside of Ni'ma's home. She had been described as an "average" Palestine refugee woman.

Like each day of the odd month that the UNRWA school is on the early shift, Ni'ma is up before six to assure her children will be washed, dressed, fed and out of the house in time for the 7:00 school bell. With her husband off to work and all but 3 year old Ahmad at school, Ni'ma can take him to day care at the women's centre, go to the market and begin her morning chores. Her shopping is done on a wide and crowded street lined with small stores jutting out onto the sidewalk. Mornings, the street and the stores are packed. Fresh food is bought daily for the family – vegetables, sweets, eggs, hummus, chicken, fish, spices and the ever present Arabic bread. With the price of lamb up to more than \$8.00 a kilo, meat is a luxury.

## A day in the life of...Ni'ma

This is the busy edge of Amman New Camp, home to almost 40,000 Palestine refugees with more than twice that number living nearby. Most refugees have spent their lives on congested streets like these in and around the edges of the camp, just as their parents did before them and as their children are all too likely to do.

There is no respite from crowds, noise and motion. An endless stream of cars coat the wide street. Exhaust fumes hang in the air. For anyone unused to the thick grey clouds, breathing quickly becomes a conscious act of will. The incessant cacophony of horns beep a challenge to normal speech. Ni'ma, holding her son's hand, effortlessly makes her way through it all. One is left to wonder what is "average" about this woman.

She is soft spoken and articulate, full of ideas and well into her seventh pregnancy. Her poise and outgoing personality belie her background. One of 10 children, Ni'ma spent her life in Amman New Camp. Her mother was illiterate, her father completed three years of school. Like most refugee women, she has responsibilities not only to her own family but to her parents and her in-laws as well.



The playground for Ni'ma's children in front of her house.

At the age of 32, she has been married 12 years. Her children form a series of human steps - 11, 9, 8, 7, 5, 3. She and her husband had hoped to stop after the sixth child, but in the face of a seventh, Ni'ma smiles and explains simply that "God was kind to us."

With all her responsibilities, she has still found time to become active in the UNRWA-sponsored

Women's Centre, for dreams and plans flourish here no less than on any Main Street in Anytown. She views her recently completed course in artificial flower making as a way to improve her family's life, if even a little. Ni'ma has worked hard on the Centre's upcoming bazaar.

The daunting price of cut flowers leaves a large market for artificial ones. Through her flower displays she hopes to expand her corner on the market. Skilled and ambitious, Ni'ma plans to open her own store soon and sell her handicrafts. She continues to make herself far above average in a far below average world. How she does so could fill a book on diligence, patience and self-motivation.



Ni'ma, left, finds a buyer for her artificial flowers at the UNRWA bazaar.

"Our lives have always been very difficult. We lead lives of continuous struggle, very different from life in the West." Despite it all, the only question to which she found no answer was "What would you change in your life if you could?"

Clues to her nature are hidden among the details as she speaks of preparing meals and caring for the family, using her small amount of evening time to fix clothes, straighten the apartment, endlessly repairing and improving the things of her life. Pleasure in daily accomplishments and endless striving are natural to her. As is hope - for herself, her family and the future. "I wish for my children a better future, one based on a good education, and a successful life in Palestine."



## Palestinian portraits: Jawad al-Malhi

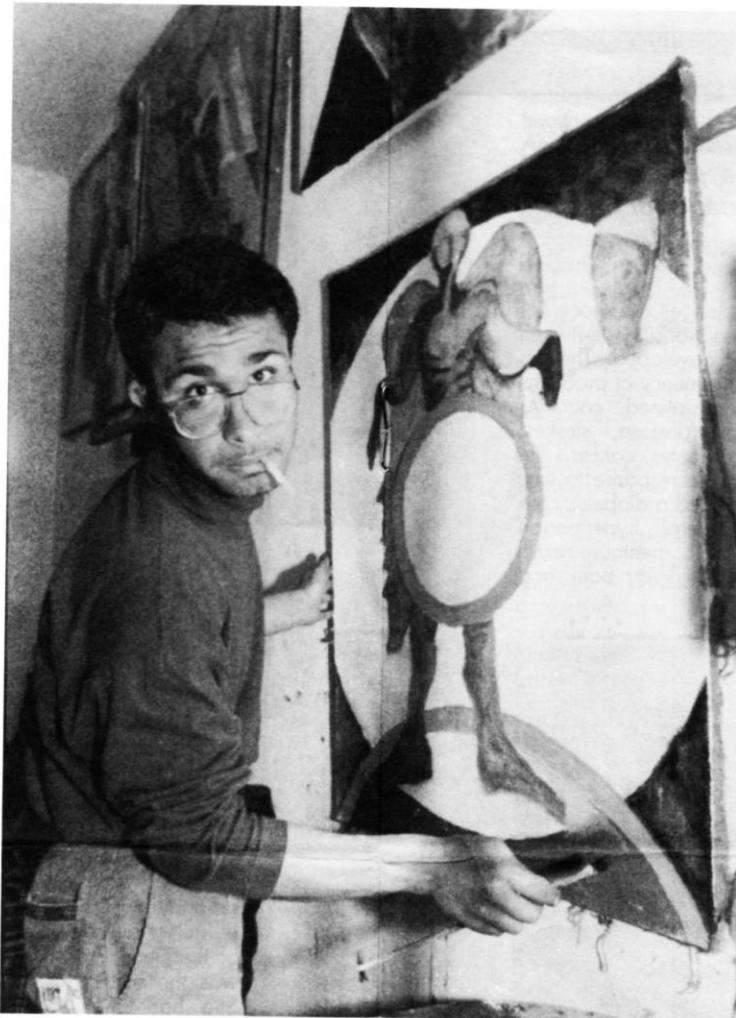
JAWAD AL MALHI is a Palestine refugee from Shu'fat refugee camp on the outskirts of Jerusalem. He is also an artist.

Camp life has an obvious influence on Jawad's paintings. Street scenes and refugee children at play are depicted in muted, earthy colours. The art is inextricably but subtly bound up with the political realities of being a Palestine refugee. He paints on the coarse sacking of UNRWA flour bags - food handouts that have been distributed to destitute Palestine refugees by the Agency since 1950. Many of his paintings focus on the role of women in Palestinian society.

One room in Jawad's family home in the camp has been set aside as an art studio. Set against the daily turmoil and hardship of the camp, it is an improbable location - a far cry from the peace and tranquility favoured by many artists. The walls are covered with Jawad's artwork. Folders, fat with sketches and drawings of work in progress lie propped up against a makeshift easel. The studio is also a meeting place for artists, intellectuals and students of Jawad.

Jawad's work has been exhibited in Japan, Egypt and Jordan as well as in Israel and the occupied territory. He is a member of the Association of Palestinian Artists in the occupied territory and spends much of his time promoting art within his community through organising and teaching art courses.

Jawad was born in Jerusalem in 1969 to refugee parents who fled their original home in what is now Israel to the Old City of Jerusalem during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. They were re-accommodated in Shu'fat camp in the 1970's.



*Painting title: "Dream"*





*Jawad with his painting, "Day of Peace"*



## Not enough of a good thing...

**Dr. Robert Cook, on loan to UNRWA from the World Health Organization (WHO), is Director of UNRWA's Health Department. He reflects on the challenges, problems and successes of the UNRWA health programme and speaks with equal candour on its strengths and shortcomings.**

### A complex machine

UNRWA's health care system is complex for a variety of reasons. It is spread across five diverse areas of the Near East - the Israeli-occupied territory of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. It functions in urban centres like Damascus and Amman, as well as in camps, small towns and remote country areas. It must function equally well in times of relative quiet and in times of confrontation and emergency. Yet, says Dr. Cook, "despite enormous difficulties, and for all its problems, the good far outweighs the bad."

The UNRWA health care system is also complex because, by any standards, it is big. Some two million refugees used UNRWA health care facilities in 1991. Taking into account repeat visits and other medical services, that translates into around 6.2 million recorded patient visits to UNRWA facilities last year.

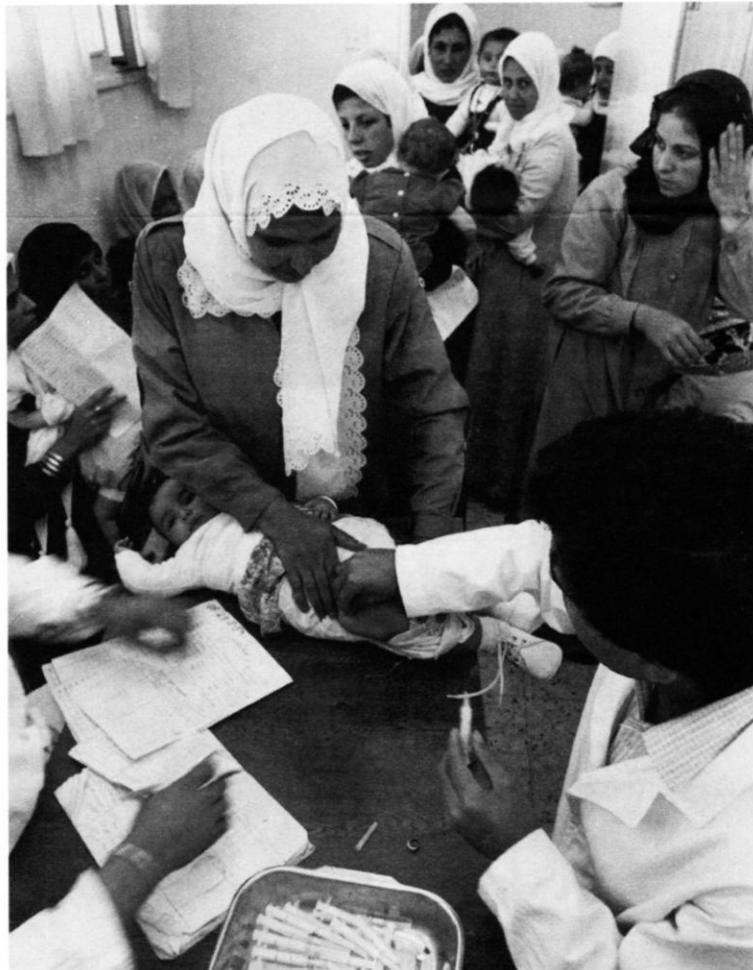
A typical industrialized country carries out its health care programmes with a budget averaging \$1,500 per person. UNRWA has to provide health care using only \$25.00 per refugee. UNRWA's average patient load per doctor per day is 102. In Gaza it goes as high as 146 patients per doctor per day.

The health department is seeking ways to lower the average over the next three years to 70 patients per doctor per day. This would greatly increase the time a doctor can spend with a patient and improve the quality of care. A first step has been taken with plans to recruit five new medical teams for Gaza's five most severely overcrowded health centres.

Still UNRWA health care, on the whole, has an outstanding track record. According to Dr. Cook, "even though the quality of a number of our buildings is very upsetting, it is in complete contradiction to the quality of care being provided."

UNRWA health care, under the technical guidance of WHO, has developed and changed its focus with the size and needs of the Palestine refugee population. When UNRWA began its health operations, care focused on the problems of malnutrition and control of communicable diseases. Now, Dr. Cook says, "there are only tiny remnants of these problems left in comparison with 20 or 30 years ago."

Today's challenges are those "of a community in transition between developing and developed. There is an increasing frequency of problems found in industrialized countries such as heart disease, strokes, hypertension, diabetes, cancer - life style diseases." In response to this, UNRWA has added a diabetes care programme, several hypertension clinics and a mental health programme in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.



Immunization clinic at UNRWA health centre in Gaza Town.

### Limited resources

UNRWA's severe budgetary restrictions are reflected in limited health dollars and staff per refugee. An additional burden is that usage of the health facilities has risen by about one third over the last four years. Yet, Dr. Cook says, "UNRWA's budget goes up annually by only a few percentage points, and health's share of it remains the same, creating a situation where need far outweighs resources."

Dr. Cook admits that "short of printing our own money", he sees no clear solution to the resource problem. But his department has learned to get the most out of every health dollar. "We emphasize primary health care and preventive services, especially for the most vulnerable groups, women and children. With primary and preventive care, the expenditure on something like immunization or other methods of disease control, brings results which are immense in relation to the relatively small amount of money spent."

"This of course, is the policy of WHO," says Dr. Cook. They are strongly oriented to primary health care because the return in health benefits to large segments of the population is so beneficial per dollar spent. And he adds, "UNRWA's health policy is in fact identical with that of WHO."

### Clear priorities

The health department has identified three major priority areas. Top on the list is environmental health in the occupied territory and Lebanon. "Only about one fifth of camp refugee dwellings in the occupied territory are connected to mains drainage. The results are deplorable. Latrines overflow and the environment is saturated with pollutants," says Dr. Cook.

In Lebanon, implementation of top priority projects has already begun. In the West Bank and Gaza, Dr. Cook said the problem "is not only sewerage work in the camps carried out by UNRWA, but support to the municipalities which are extremely impoverished." Even with improved and additional sewerage disposal schemes, Dr. Cook still poses the question: "What do you do with the waste when you reach the camp boundary?"

In Gaza, this problem is compounded by the extremely inadequate supply and quality of water. Increasing salinity and, in some areas, nitrate concentrations exceeding international standards by more than 20 times, makes much of the water unfit both for drinking and for agriculture.

It is an extremely complex business which requires a lot of careful co-operation which, unfortunately, is not always forthcoming. It also requires a lot of money. Nevertheless, Dr. Cook strongly believes that "we must create a viable working mechanism for planning, fund raising and implementing environmental health projects in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Lebanon."

A second priority for UNRWA is to increase the number of hospital beds available to refugees in Gaza. With a ratio of 1.8 beds per thousand population, the West Bank is typical of the region. But Dr. Cook says, "Gaza is way behind with only 1.2 beds per thousand population. Existing hospitals are inadequate and terribly expensive for the uninsured. After much consideration of all options, the Agency decided to build the Gaza Hospital."

High on the list of health priorities is not only to finish the Gaza

hospital, but according to Dr. Cook, the most important part "is to run it as a first class general hospital. It is the quality of care that counts. The care can be simple, but the quality must be top."

The next fundamental priority says Dr. Cook, is to implement "in deed as well as in theory, the policy of WHO which states that proper birth spacing and family planning are integral parts of maternal and child health care." Dr. Cook stated that "fertility-related factors and short birth interval are now the greatest single cause of remaining infant mortality and maternal ill health and mortality. We cannot make any major impact on bringing infant mortality down from the present rates of 30 to 40 per thousand to 10 and 15 unless we help women achieve their own wishes in regard to child-bearing," he said.

According to Dr. Cook, there is a tremendous unmet need for assistance in family planning. "To make a major impact on the welfare and health of women and children, we need to have a formal post-natal visit with every woman who came to us for ante-natal care. We need to help her attain her wishes as to the spacing between the child she just had and a future child," he said.



Rimal Health Centre, near Beach Camp, Gaza.

## Many successes

Added to UNRWA's ability to cope with increasing numbers of patients against a background of limited resources and increasing financial constraints, are immense successes in the provision of some vital areas of health care.

Perhaps the greatest success of the health programme is a hidden one, a persistence against the odds. UNRWA health care has continued to improve amidst all of the increasing complications, deprivations, problems and economic decline faced in recent years by the Palestine refugee population.

UNRWA's programmes of child nutritional surveillance, and immunization have had far-reaching effects on the general improvement of the health status of the refugee population. Most recently, the new

diabetes programme has added almost 4,000 users in just one year.

## New strategies

Dr. Cook sees hope for further advances in the delivery of health care through the upgrading and expansion of a wide range of medical services in many camps and in increased community participation such as the consultative group established to advise UNRWA on the Gaza hospital.

The gradual introduction of an appointment system will improve patient flow and increase the time a doctor can spend with patients. These are important steps which will ultimately go a long way toward improving the quality of care provided to refugees.

But one major problem is always there - there's just not enough of a good thing.

**"The only way refugees can express their appreciation is with their feet - and they're obviously doing that. Utilization of health services has jumped by almost 40 percent in the last five years. True, we provide a free service in times of economic constraint and hardships. But we also provide a quality service. Our antenatal care, immunization programme and diabetic care are at the level that is equal to or superior to anything else in the five areas - even including some private health schemes."**

Cont. from page 4

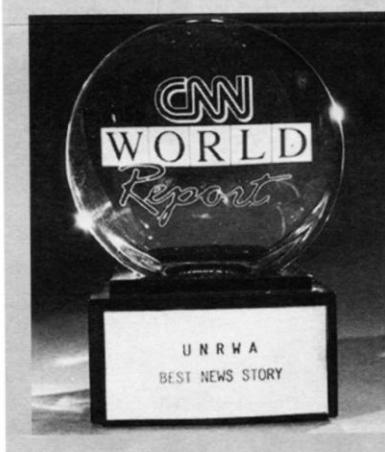
Najwa Kefeyeh, UNRWA Women's Programme Specialist based in Amman, was impressed by the way the trainees themselves had set up their innovative Women's Development Bank during her recent visit to Qabr Essit camp. "If this project turns out to be a success, it could be an example for many other Women's Programmes: Centres throughout UNRWA."

Another of the loan recipients, Faten Mustafa, gave credit to everyone involved in the project. "We will never forget that these loans are the fruit of excellent co-operation between the women and our UNRWA supervisors."

For the women of Qabr Essit camp, the new bank has accomplished much more than helping five women to acquire their own sewing machines; it has given new confidence to everyone involved in the project.

At the centres, women can acquire and practise simple craft and household skills supplemented by lectures on hygiene and home management. Many of the centres

## UNRWA receives CNN news award



also offer literacy classes, first-aid and child care training as well as a wide range of cultural and sport activities.

Maisaa Shihab found it difficult to speak through her tears. "It's almost impossible to describe how delighted I am to have a sewing machine of my own at home. The loan and the sewing machine will help me to take a more active part in supporting my family."

UNRWA's Public Information Office received an award for the Best Television News Story of 1991 from the Cable News Network (CNN) in Atlanta. The award-winning story, which was shown on CNN World Report in November 1991 when the Madrid peace talks were just beginning, portrayed the history of Palestine refugees since 1948.

Over 85 news clips were entered in five categories. UNRWA-produced clips were also one of three finalists in two other categories. CNN World Report airs unedited news stories each day from broadcasters around the world. Each year, UNRWA produces between 10 and 15 news stories for broadcast by CNN and other national and satellite networks.

## "I want to learn" – coping with school closures in the Gaza Strip

WHEN six UNRWA schools in the Gaza Strip were closed by Israeli military order in early 1992, over 2000 pupils stood to be deprived indefinitely of a basic human right – education. Two Agency elementary schools in Deir al-Balah were served with open-ended closure orders following the killing on 5 January of an Israeli settler nearby. When four more UNRWA schools in Bureij, Rafah and Nuseirat camps were closed in separate incidents in late January and mid-February, they followed the Deir al-Balah example.

### Meeting the challenge

UNRWA's education department in Gaza responded immediately. Teachers were determined to find some way of keeping the educational process alive for their students. Gaza Field Education Officer Ahmed Hillis pointed out that "when the Deir al-Balah schools were closed, UNRWA started a pioneering initiative to find places for the pupils where they could get properly scheduled lessons following the normal curriculum."

Other UNRWA schools could not provide places. They were already filled to the limit with their normal intake. Alternative accommodation had to be found. UNRWA's Physical Education Supervisor Mu'ammar Bseisou was chosen to organise and co-ordinate the scheme. Through UNRWA staff in Deir al-Balah, he appealed to the local community for teaching space.

News of the appeal travelled fast in the refugee community. Religious leaders in the community came forward and offered UNRWA the use of local mosques. Shopowners cleared storage areas to make room for classes and local homeowners also made space available.

Timetabling was carefully worked out. UNRWA used contacts in the local community to coordinate schedules and locations. Pupils worked out timing and location of lessons through notices posted in local mosques and word of mouth.

In spite of the difficulties school attendance has not suffered. UNRWA records show regular attendance of more than 95 per

cent. The scheme was winning the fight to maintain educational levels reached before the closures, according to a mathematics teacher from Nuseirat camp. He said that contrary to expectations, students absorbed new material relatively easily.



Teaching in a local mosque in Bureij.

Teachers had to adapt to these new circumstances. Instead of moving across a school compound to take the next lesson, they often had to take a taxi to a substitute classroom on the other side of the camp. There was less chance to talk and confer with their colleagues. Staff meetings were more difficult to organise. In some cases, syllabi had to be amended. The science syllabus, for example, had to be rescheduled to postpone topics requiring laboratory demonstrations.

### Pupils comment

How have the pupils reacted to the new initiative? Eleven-year old Atef Abu Ataya in the fifth grade of the Nuseirat preparatory boys' school said that he preferred to have the alternative classes than no school at all, but had some regrets. "I miss physical education classes the most," he said. "We can't have practices in the mosques and it's not safe to leave the mosque and play in the streets."

Speaking in the simple, whitewashed surroundings of one of the Nuseirat mosques, another student was nostalgic for his normal classroom. "In the mosque we sit and write on the floor. At school, we had proper desks. It was much more comfortable. Here we don't have cultural activities, we don't have pictures and maps on the walls and we can't do sports. I come here, though, because I want to learn."

Students also miss seeing school friends from different classes. "I go to a class in a shop in Deir al Balah, but most of my friends are a long way away in other parts of the camp," said fifth grade student Manal Mahmoud Abu Samra. "I miss them and I am looking forward to the day when my school is reopened."

### Working for results

Teachers have been helping the students to keep in touch. Omar al-Qahwaji, a social studies teacher said that he was happy to take messages from students in one class to another as he did his teaching rounds. "Besides my work as a teacher, I've also become a postman," he added jokingly.

The scheme has evidently been successful in providing education for children who would otherwise be sitting at home losing precious school time. Field Education Officer Hillis stressed that although he considered the initiative to be essential, "teaching young students in these alternative locations can under no circumstances be a substitute for the real thing."

**Editor's Note:** Since this story was written, these schools have been allowed to reopen by the Israeli authorities. However, students, teachers and school administrators in the West Bank and Gaza continue to cope with frequent disruptions to educational life due to school closures resulting from military orders, curfews and strikes.



*Sports activities in Khan Younis boys school, Gaza.*

## **Palestine Refugees Today**

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