

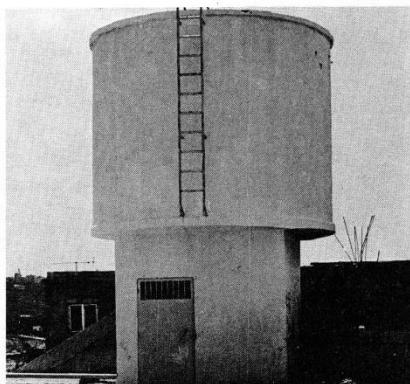
Palestine Refugees Today



Nº 89



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Cover: Mahmoud Taher, head teacher at Mieh Mieh school
near Sidon, Lebanon. See page 6.

Rendezvous in Sinai

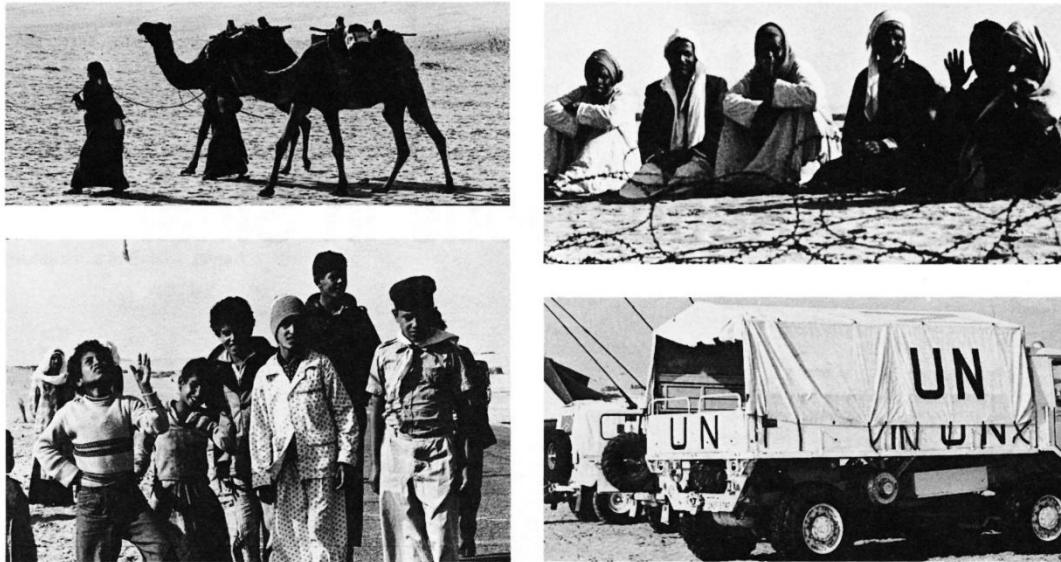


A tightly organised international operation was needed to bring in many of the school textbooks that Gaza refugee children have been using this year. As in previous years, Gaza's 132 UNRWA schools follow the Egyptian educational system. Formerly administered by Egypt, the Strip was occupied by Israel in 1967.

All UNRWA schools follow the school system of their host country. This is in the interest of the refugee children who grow up there and who must take the state examinations of the country to enter secondary schools and universities.

Since the Israeli occupation of Gaza, UNRWA has had to seek special permission to import the textbooks from Egypt that are used in the Gaza schools. The transfer of the books from the printers in Cairo to the Gaza Strip (with more than 350,000 Palestine refugees registered there with UNRWA, 75,000 of them children attending UNRWA schools) is the final step in a long series of events that started months earlier.

This year's transfer began early one morning when a station wagon with UNRWA markings rumbled through the deserted, still-sleeping streets of Gaza town and headed south. Destination: the Sinai desert.



Vegetation becomes sparser, almost disappearing with only endless sand remaining, as the caravan moves on into the desert. It arrives at a camp, set up for just a day a few hundred metres from the village of El Kherba. The camp is surrounded by Bedouin huts whose inhabitants are kept away by a circle of barbed wire, 300 metres in diameter.

Across the dunes

As it passed Rafah, the last village on the Gaza Strip, groups of children were already on the move, going to school.

A Red Cross escort car moved into position ahead of the station wagon as it roared on into the desert—low sand dunes with tufts of parched greenery thrown into relief as the rising sun began to burn through the morning haze.

Now the convoy was overtaking not children, but Israeli soldiers. And the rusted carcasses of tanks and other relics of past battles.

The last of the vegetation died away and the only relief from the monotony of the desert was a group of Bedouin moving between the dunes, camel in tow.

More uniforms now. This time worn by Swedish soldiers of the United Nations Emergency Force in Sinai. At last the convoy arrived at a camp with big Red

Cross tents. The encampment, set up for only one day near the village of El Kherba, is surrounded by a circle of barbed wire 300 metres in diameter. It keeps everyone away except a few Bedouin children curiously waiting at its perimeter to see what is going to happen.

Precious cargo

Four more trucks are on their way—two empty trucks coming from Gaza and two trucks from Cairo laden with a precious cargo. Just past noon the trucks from Gaza arrive, then shortly after the trucks from Cairo.

The transfer of 130 crates to the Gaza-bound vehicles begins under the watchful eye of UNRWA's Field Supply and Transport Officer in Gaza, Colin Garland. Red Cross representatives from both Egypt and Gaza supervise the formalities of the transfer.



A little past noon, two empty trucks from Gaza arrive, followed soon after by two trucks from Cairo loaded with 130 crates. The transfer begins under the watchful eye of UNRWA's Field Transport and Supply Officer in Gaza, Colin Garland. The crates hold a total of 52,500 books. The tents are taken down, the barbed wire is rolled up, and the books go on their way.

Everything is in order. The 130 crates are all there. They hold a total of 52,500 books. Soon the trucks part again, empty for Cairo this time; laden for Gaza, where these books are destined to help refugee children maintain their phenomenal pass rate of 80 per cent.

The book transfer was the final stage of the process that began the previous spring when the Egyptian Ministry of Education sent sample texts to UNRWA's Education Department. These were the texts prescribed for this year of schooling.

The texts were then passed on to UNESCO, the United Nations body responsible for education, for approval in conformity with their Executive Board resolutions and then to the occupying authorities for the issue of import permits.

Often the school year ends before clearance has been obtained for all of the books. In May this year, only 47 of the 102 books on the 1978/79 curriculum had been, or were about to be, approved.

Folding up the tents

Once all the steps in the approval process have been taken, UNRWA's Liaison Office in Cairo orders the books, if there are any left in stock—which is not always the case. When the available books are ready, plans are made for the transfer and trucks leave Gaza and Cairo simultaneously for their rendezvous in Sinai.

As soon as the transfer is complete, the young Bedouin scurry away and the UN soldiers fold up the tents and roll the barbed wire with a feeling of a job well done. Another valuable consignment is on its way to Gaza's UN schools.

And next year? In the fast-moving political arena of the Middle East, no one knows for sure what will happen but, with the opening of the Israeli/Egyptian frontier, formalities for the transfer of textbooks for UNRWA schools in the Gaza strip should be simplified.

A Healthy Child... A Sure Future

Of the 125 million children born in 1978, 12 million are not likely to live to see their first birthday, said Dr. H. Mahler, Director-General of the World Health Organization in a message commemorating World Health Day.

The theme of this year's World Health Day was: A Healthy Child, a Sure Future.

"Of an estimated 1,500 million children in the world today, 1,220 million or 81 per cent live in developing countries, a majority of them in an environment characterized by malnutrition, infection, poor housing, lack of safe water and sanitation, and inadequate health care," said Dr. Mahler.

"Starting with such a serious disadvantage, most of these children have little chance of realizing their full economic and social potential. They will in turn give birth to another unhealthy generation, thus helping to perpetuate a vicious cycle."

In a bulletin issued on World Health Day, UNRWA's Director of Health, Dr. Jean Puyet, said: "Since the early days of its mandate, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency has strongly emphasized the health care to be delivered to child-bearing women and children themselves because of their special vulnerability and because of their sheer numerical importance: two-thirds of the refugee population registered with UNRWA consist of women of child-bearing age and of children under the age of 15."

Health Needs

One quarter of Palestine refugee children under three years of age living in refugee camps are "definitely anaemic", says a report to the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The report is based on a survey carried out during the first half of 1978 by World Health Organization experts attached to UNRWA. The size of this problem is manageable but the "present situation definitively calls for remedial action", the report states.

Malnutrition among the refugee children does not present a problem of alarming magnitude and the same problem exists to a similar extent among non-refugee children living in the same geographical area, the report says.

By Resolution 32/111 of 15 December 1977, the General Assembly requested Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim, in collaboration with the governments of host countries and relevant UN bodies, to undertake a sample survey to find out the needs of Palestine refugee children in camps with a view to averting adverse effects on their health.

About 1.56 million registered refugees are eligible for UNRWA health services. An estimated 660,000 of them are children under the age of 15, of whom more than 230,000 live in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and the occupied territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

UNRWA carries out an extensive relief and health-care programme among eligible registered refugees. This



of Refugee Children

includes 84 pre natal and infant health clinics, a school health programme, distribution of rations plus a milk distribution and supplementary feeding programme for groups most vulnerable to malnutrition. Recently UNRWA's daily hot meal programme for children has been extended to include children up to eight years of age, instead of six years. This provides six hot meals a week to children from age three to eight.

Nutrition Surveys

Since 1950 a number of nutrition surveys have been carried out among the Palestine refugee population. There were annual surveys from 1950 to 1954, limited surveys in 1958 and 1959, comprehensive surveys in 1961 and 1962 and limited investigations in 1968 and 1970.

These first surveys showed that despite the unfavourable living conditions of the refugees, no major deterioration in health had taken place and their over-all nutritional status was better than expected. Successive studies corroborated this. They revealed little evidence of malnutrition among adults and school children, but a moderate protein deficiency was noted among infants and small children.

The most recent surveys in 1974, 1975 and 1978 therefore focused on the population groups already identified as the most vulnerable: children under four, pregnant women and nursing mothers.

These surveys showed a satisfactory general nutritional state among the UNRWA-assisted refugee children. This is substantiated by the absence of severe nutritional failure among infants and small children and by the negligible occurrence among them of specific clinical deficiency signs.

The main nutritional problem among Palestine refugee children is a mild to moderate protein-energy malnutrition which is relatively widespread during the weaning period, when the child is in transition between total breast feeding and complete weaning. The essential feature appears to be that this malnutrition is linked to infectious gastro-intestinal upsets. When compared with similar data derived from a non-refugee population living in the same area (Hijazi, Jordan in 1975) as well as data from the United States (U.S. Public Health Service, 1975), the UNRWA nutrition survey findings indicate that malnutrition among refugee children does not present a problem of alarming magnitude and that the same problem exists to a very similar extent among the non-refugee population of the age groups concerned.

In Jordan in particular, both groups of children (Jordanian nationals and Palestine refugees) follow a strikingly similar pattern of growth. Furthermore the data collected during the recent surveys, when compared with the results of the nutrition survey conducted in 1963, demonstrate that during the past decade both refugee and non-refugee children have realized a marked improvement in their growth pattern which must be assumed to be due to a significant rise in their general nutritional state.

Another important finding of the 1978 survey was the relatively high proportion of infants and small children with moderate-low levels of haemoglobin which reflect the presence of widely spread iron deficiency anaemia. While about a quarter of the children below three years of age appear to enjoy a satisfactorily high level of haemoglobin, half of them are maintaining only a precarious marginal level while the remaining quarter are definitely anaemic.

The size of the problem is therefore quite manageable but the current situation calls for remedial action, the report warned. The condition seems slightly worse in Lebanon, a probable result of the continued disturbances in that country and the problems that the refugee population has had to face.



One of the major concerns of UNRWA's health programme is the care of children and women of child-bearing age.

The Proud Tower

The view from Mieh-Mieh camp is spectacular, overlooking the ancient city of Sidon, Lebanon and the Mediterranean. However beautiful the setting may be, it is a refugee camp that until last September had no water outlet.

Four trucks a day used to haul water up the steep, winding road of the mountain side. But that scarcely met the needs of the camp's more than 2,000 residents. Only 40 litres a day for each family—often eight or ten people—for cooking, washing and drinking.

When the daily water distribution took place, there were often arguments among camp residents, recalls Mahmoud Taher, head teacher at the Mieh Mieh UNRWA school. So many camp residents had to look after their own needs. This sometimes meant hiring a taxi to take them down the mountain and back up with a few cans full of water.

Residents tried over and over again to remedy this situation. But the owner of the highest point of vacant land in the camp area always refused permission to erect a water tower. They finally had enough of this situation and camp leaders decided to do something about water supply.

Three committees were formed. One had the job of obtaining authorisation to build and to handle relations with UNRWA (UNRWA agreed to pay for the reservoir in the water tower). The second was for fund raising—\$55,000 was needed—and the third was to co-ordinate construction with a Lebanese contractor who was willing to do the main work without taking a big profit. Authorization was granted, the camp residents put up 50 LL (\$16) per family, a few private donors pitched in and the Palestine Liberation Organisation put up the difference. In three months there was enough money.

Construction began on the plot of land just behind Mieh Mieh school. Mahmoud Taher, who was actively involved in the project, described the progress. Work went on night and day under the supervision of the contractor. Camp residents visited the site regularly to see how the construction was going. It was difficult to believe that water would soon be flowing through pipes down the streets of the camp.

Work was completed in four months.

Since camp residents realised the advantage of co-



Mieh Mieh's water tower stands as a proud example of what self-help projects and community co-operation can do.



Mahmoud Taher (below, right), a former pupil at the Mieh Mieh school, is now its head teacher. The school building, built in 1909, has survived earthquakes but is now in need of major repairs.



operation, self-help projects have caught on. Another involved laying concrete in the schoolyard.

Now there is a taste for co-operation and what it can do. There is a lot more to be done, just around the school itself. Mr. Taher points to the collapsing roof of the aging school and mentions the need for a wall around the playground that would prevent buildings from further encroaching on the already small yard. Mahmoud Taher has been around Mieh Mieh for a long time. He attended this school, came back as a teacher, then became head teacher. Now he has children in the school. Another example of how long it has been since these people became refugees.

Impressions and Ideas

Part 2: a selection of essays written in English by Palestine refugee children from UNRWA preparatory (lower secondary) schools in Jordan.

1. My Lost City by Aziz Muhammad Al-Rifai, Al Nuzha Preparatory Boys' School, Third Year Preparatory, age 14.

My city is located 15 kilometres north of Jerusalem. It stands on hills which are covered with various kinds of trees that represent a spectacle of natural beauty. Its air during summer is dry and pure so it has become a famous summer resort. Its winter season is cold with occasional snow. As to its communications with the cities, it is joined with most towns and cities by a system of good roads. It is a city with many schools and colleges.

This is my city. Have you known it, Sir? It is Ramallah. The most famous city in my country.

2. One Night in my Life by Hanan Mohammed Hussein Azzam, Third Preparatory, Al Nuzha Girls' School, age 14.

It was a cold rainy night, my family gathered round the stove. My father started telling us about the beautiful days he had spent in our village, Beit Dajan, 30 years ago.

"You know my children," my father said, "it is not very big like Amman or Irbid but it is a small, quiet village, surrounded by orchards and wide green fields. Life there was simple. People like each other and they work together in the fields." He remembered them going to the fields early in the morning singing and chattering. He remembered the smiles on the children's faces and all the beautiful memories there. Then my older brother asked my father to stop so that he would be able to go on the next night with memories about our village and the happy days he had spent there.

3. Camp Life in Jordan by Su'ad Ahed Rabu, Baqaa Preparatory Girls' School, age 14.

As we know there are many refugee

camps in Jordan such as Wahdat, Baqqa, Suf, el-Hussein and many other camps in the West Bank of Jordan such as Ein el-Sultan, Aqabat Jabr, Fawwar, Arrub. In these camps, many thousands of people live in poor houses.

Some houses are made of wood, others of metal and others are made of concrete as in the West Bank. In Baqaa camp there are 50,000 people

in these rough houses which are very cold in winter and very hot in summer.

There are no good roads, no lines for water. The roads are very rough and muddy but there are one or two main streets in each camp.

The inhabitants of these camps get food monthly from the United Nations such as flour, rice, sugar and oil. Some of these people live from working in the nearest cities such as Amman, Zarqa and so on.

The life in winter in Baqaa camp is very bad and rough because of muddy roads. The people must wear high boots and thick pullovers to keep warm.

Commissioner-General Retires

Mr. Thomas W. McElhiney retired as UNRWA Commissioner-General in April. Deputy Commissioner-General Alan J. Brown has been appointed Acting Commissioner-General pending the nomination of a successor by United Nations Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim.

Mr. McElhiney, who became Commissioner-General in April 1977 after three years as Deputy, told Headquarters staff at a farewell ceremony in Vienna: "What we are all trying to do is give everything we can—our lives and our work and such money as we can collect—to benefit the refugees. This is still a problem. I will try to go on helping with this problem even after I retire because I believe in it."

Before joining UNRWA in 1974, Mr. McElhiney served in the U.S. Foreign Service, latterly with the rank of Ambassador.

Following the wish of Mr. McElhiney, a collection taken up by staff to mark his retirement has been donated to provide assistance to a Pa-

lestinian refugee family. The family selected, living at Jabel Hussein camp in Jordan, consists of an old man, his paralysed 40-year-old son and 11 dependants. The gift is being used to set the son up with tools and spare parts for the repair of heating and cooking stoves, so that he can earn a living for the family.



Mr. Alfred Talamas (right) presents retiring UNRWA Commissioner-General Thomas W. McElhiney with an album of photographs of his years with UNRWA.

The courage of Kifaya

Kifaya lost both her hands and part of her forearms—at play. She had just begun her first year at the Rimal girls' school in Gaza. Like any other child, she was playing with her friends after class when the accident happened. It was a grenade, left behind after a war three years earlier.

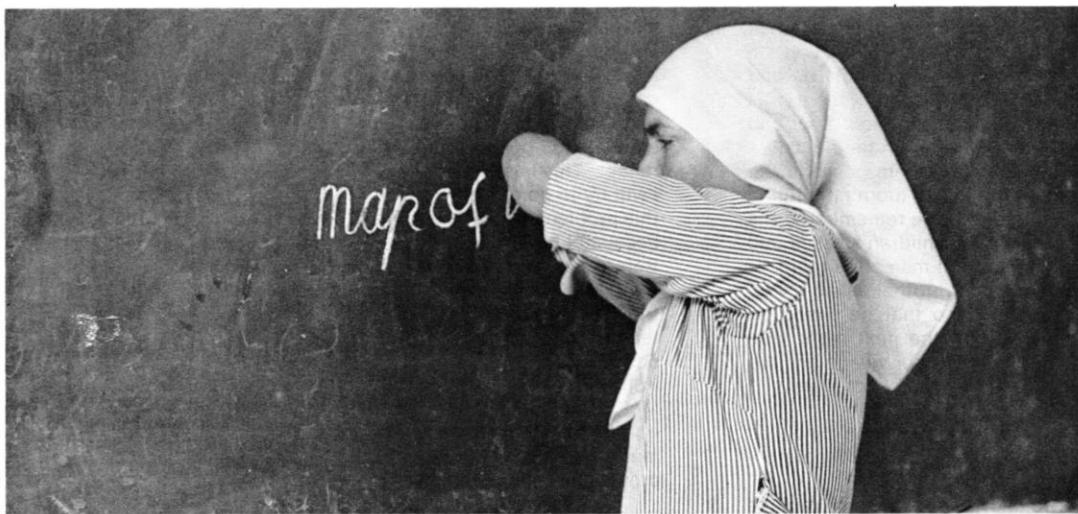
Day by day, month by month, she learned to live and to study again. Pupils and teachers—the whole school—took turns to help her. One would open her book, another would give her a pencil. Kifaya recalls how the headmistress came at the end of each day's work to teach her how to write with the stump at the end of her arm.

It was a terrible year, but Kifaya won. In spite of everything, she stayed on at Rimal with its sunny playground and its white-walled classrooms.

Today, nine years later, Kifaya is the pride of that school. She has risen through every stage of school life on her own—even learning to write and to sew. And when you ask her what she wants to be, she looks gratefully at her teachers and replies: "A doctor, so that I can help those in pain."



Although she lost both her hands, Kifaya has learned to sew and write.





Palestine Refugees Today

UNRWA Publications Available

UNRWA Basic Facts (PL 1002)
printed leaflet (English, French, German)

UNRWA and the International Year of the Child (PL 1003)
printed leaflet (English, French, German)

UNRWA Services (PB 1001)
illustrated colour folder/poster (English and German)

Survey 1978 (PB 1002)
printed brochure of facts and figures (English, French and
German)

Definitions and Statistics
mimeographed summary of UNRWA data

Map of UNRWA's area of operations
with refugee location data (English and Arabic)

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Back Cover: A hot meal being served at Askar Refugee Camp, near Nablus in the occupied West Bank. UNRWA has recently extended its hot meal programme. Now children from three to eight years of age receive six hot meals a week; formerly the programme went to age six. This is part of UNRWA's supplementary feeding scheme to provide hot meals to young Palestine refugees and to others on medical recommendation. (See story on health needs of Palestine refugee children, page 4.)

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