



Palestinian Refugee Children



“ Palestinian children are without hope now. Sometimes I do not have the feeling that I will go back to my homeland. I am afraid to die before returning back. I wish to go back. I want to feel safe. ”

Haneen, 13, Beach Camp, Gaza.

Background

2008 marks the 60th anniversary of the Palestinian "Nakba". Between late 1947 and the first half of 1949, around 750,000 Palestinians (85% of those living in what is now the State of Israel) became refugees while tens of thousands more were internally displaced. More than 500 Palestinian villages were depopulated and later destroyed.

Today Palestinian refugees and IDPs constitute one of the world's largest displaced populations. Registered refugees from the 1948 Nakba now number 4,448,429. It is a population that has yet to see many of its rights realized and that remains highly vulnerable. Palestinian refugee children are especially at risk. Most live in exile, often in refugee camps and many are exposed to ongoing conflict, violence and discrimination. Not only do Palestinian children continue to lack the protection conferred by nationality and a national government to represent their rights, but increasingly, overcrowding and lack of resources are compromising access and quality of basic services such as education and health care. (data: BADIL and UNRWA).

Save the Children spoke with Palestinian children about what it meant to be a refugee. The children talked about their frustrations at life in overcrowded camps, and the challenges and discrimination they face on a day to day basis. As can be seen through their words, feelings of insecurity and lack of freedom define their childhood.

Refugee children speak out...

Living in the camp means that I live in a place that doesn't belong to me, a place where I could be kicked out of at any moment ... I feel proud that I am Palestinian but I still need to go back to my own land and live in dignity and really feel that I am truly living in my own land, not in a foreign land being prevented from seeing my brother who lives behind the Wall.

Asma, 14, Qalandia Camp, West Bank.

We don't have garbage containers in the camp, they are only available at the Ramallah-Jerusalem main street where there are street lights too, we don't have any street lights in the camp. The air is also polluted in the camp because of the dust... and the heavy traffic smoke.

Anas, 13, Qalandia Camp, West Bank.

To me refugee means someone who was displaced from his land, deprived from his rights and lost all basic standards of life and most importantly, safety...

My days in the camp are the same. Nothing is new. I spend most of my time studying or playing with my friends. We play football in the street. We do not have clubs or playgrounds in the camp.

Morad, 15, Jabalia Camp, Gaza.



Morad tending his garden in Gaza



Ala', Anas and Asma from Qalandia Camp near Ramallah, talk about their experiences as refugee children in the OPT

General

- Approximately three-quarters of the Palestinian people are refugees or internally displaced persons and one in three refugees worldwide is Palestinian. (BADIL)¹
- 30% of all registered refugees live in camps (1,327,772 persons). There are 58 official refugee camps in 5 fields of operation; 8 in Gaza, 19 in the West Bank, 12 in Lebanon, 10 in Jordan and 9 in Syria. (UNRWA/UNRWA)
- Registered refugees make up 67% of the total population of Gaza, 35% of the total population of Jordan, 29% of the West Bank, 12% in Lebanon and 2.5% in Syria. (UNRWA)
- 42% of all registered refugees live in Jordan (1,903,490 persons), 23% in Gaza (1,048,125 persons), 16% in the West Bank (745,776 persons), 10% in Syria (451,467) and 9% in Lebanon (413,962). (UNRWA)
- 70% of Gaza's children are refugees (588,000 out of 840,000 children). Gaza also houses the largest camp population - comprising more than one third of all registered refugees residing in camps. (UNICEF)

Education

- UNRWA provides free schooling for Palestinian refugee children from grade 1 through 9 and offers limited secondary education to Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (they are denied access to Lebanese public schools while private schools are financially out of reach for most). (UNRWA).
- 83% of UNRWA elementary schools and 62% of UNRWA preparatory schools are operated in double shifts as a result of overcrowding and a lack of resources. This ranges from 93% in Jordan to 27% in the West Bank. (UNRWA)
- It is estimated that roughly 100,000 children, or 20% of children in UNRWA's schools may have special needs and are not receiving necessary help. (UNRWA)
- Approximately 19% of schools in UNRWA's areas of operation are rented (45.2% in Lebanon). Rarely constructed for this purpose, these premises often lack adequate classroom space, recreational areas, sanitation facilities, ventilation and space for extracurricular activities. In Syria, UNRWA officials say 50% of school premises need to be replaced. (UNRWA)



Refugee children in Deheisha Camp, Bethlehem, participate in activities commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Nakba.

Why does the government not provide us with a school? The government is not responsible for us... Children in private and government schools have a book for National Education, whereas, we don't have it.

Tareq, 14, Qalandia Camp, West Bank.

If I was the President of Palestine, I would focus on developing the education system, building more schools and centers for children.

Morad, 15, Jabalia Camp, Gaza.

- January 2008 exams at UNRWA schools in Gaza found 50-60% failure rates in mathematics, and a 40% failure rate in Arabic. (UNRWA)
- In Lebanon, school drop out for Palestinian children 10 years and older is 39%, ten times higher than for Lebanese children. (Government of Lebanon)

Poverty

- Between 2003 and 2006, the Palestinian population living under the poverty line ranged from 60% in Lebanon (camps), to 22% in Jordan, and 7% in Syrian Arab Republic (camps). (UNICEF)

There are no prospects for us Palestinians here. What's the point of dreaming? Sometimes I think about leaving Lebanon. It doesn't feel like our country. I'd take [my sister] with me and we'd travel to London, where our aunt has moved. I'm sure we'd both find jobs there. 🗨️

Jamila, 15, Shatila Camp, Lebanon.

My dream is to become an English teacher, but sometimes my mother says that people can't have dreams if they live in Shatila. What if she's right? 🗨️

Farah, 14, Shatila Camp, Lebanon.

- In 2007 80% of Palestinian refugees in the OPT were living below the poverty line as compared to 20% in 2000. (UNRWA)
- Refugees in the OPT are more vulnerable to food insecurity than non-refugees (i.e. they cannot afford a balanced meal). By 2007 refugee food insecurity in the OPT was 40% rising to 45% for those living in camps as compared to 34% overall. (WFP)

¹Badil data relates to all Palestinian refugees and internally displaced persons since 1948 while UNRWA data only refers to 1948 refugees registered with the agency.

- In 2006, 22% of Palestinians in the OPT were living in deep consumption poverty, i.e. unable to meet basic food, clothing and housing needs. The highest deep consumption poverty rates were observed amongst Gazans and refugees in the OPT. (UNRWA)

Protection

- The percentage of Palestinian refugee girls married by age 18 is 35.4% in Gaza and 34.7% in the West Bank. Corresponding statistics for Palestinian girls in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria are 26.1%, 21.2% and 21.1%. (UNRWA)
- Refugees remain highly vulnerable to ongoing displacement. For example, 16,000 Palestinian refugees were displaced during the 2006 war in Lebanon; 31,000 were displaced in May-September 2007 from Nahr al-Bared camp; and 2,521 refugee shelters were destroyed in the Gaza Strip between October 2000 and June 2005 displacing 24,000 persons. UNRWA / BADIL / UNRWA).
- A 2003 study found refugees in the OPT were the most vulnerable to the effects of conflict. Whereas 20% of the Palestinian population required psycho-social support, the corresponding figure for refugees was 44%, rising to 53% among camp populations. (cited in UNRWA)
- There are an estimated 3,000 non-ID Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (refugees registered neither with UNRWA nor the Lebanese authorities). Children born to non-ID Palestinian fathers become non-ID holders and are at high risk of school drop out. An ID is required to sit the obligatory intermediate schooling exam at age 15. (Danish Refugee Council 2005)

A child in the camp can't find anything to play with. Last year, there was a 14 year-old child playing at the camp entrance when a tank came and shot him dead, his name was Mohammed, he was just playing.

Asma, 14, Qalandia Camp, West Bank.

What I hate is the discrimination and the prejudice we face once I am outside the camp. They look at us as inferior and that's why I feel like a stranger when I am outside the camp. Whenever there is a problem in school among secondary boys, it is always turned into refugee and non-refugee conflict... I remember when the soldiers used to come and chase us and how we would run from one roof to another, we considered it as a game while they considered it a war.

Th'aer, 16, Deheisha Camp, West Bank.

Health

- UNRWA doctors handle an average of 100 patient visits per day, reaching as high as 118 in Gaza . On average UNRWA doctors see almost 40 per cent more patients per day than international norms recommend. (UNRWA /UNRWA)

The prevalence of diseases among Palestinian children is directly related to poverty and substandard housing and unhealthy environments where they live.

Government of Lebanon ²

There is only one clinic in the camp that offers first aid services. When we are sick, we go to a private doctor.

Ala', 12, Qalandia Camp, West Bank.



Refugee children in Deheisha Camp, Bethlehem, participate in activities commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Nakba.

- Anemia is a principal health challenge for Palestine refugees. On average, a quarter of all pregnant and nursing refugee women are anemic, with the incidence in Gaza reaching 31% and 45% respectively in 2006. Incidence of anemia among refugee infants of 6 to 11 months is 44% in Lebanon, and nearly 60 % in Gaza. The WHO considers anemia incidence over 20% a public health problem. (UNRWA)
- In 2003 UNRWA recorded infant mortality rates of 22.5 deaths per 1,000 live births in Jordan, 19.2 in Lebanon, 28.1 in Syrian Arab Republic, 25.2 in Gaza Strip and 15.3 in the West Bank. (UNRWA)

² Cited in the third periodic report of States parties due in 2003 (CRC): Lebanon. UN Doc. CRC/C/129/Add.7, 25 October 2005, para. 477-78.



Save the Children

- In the OPT refugee children are at risk of death and injury as a result of the conflict. 344 children in Gaza and 440 children in the West Bank were killed from September 2000 until end 2005, representing 19.9% of total fatalities. Among those killed, 159 were UNRWA school children, of whom four were killed by Israeli fire into UNRWA schools. In addition, a total of 1,548 children enrolled in UNRWA schools were injured, of whom 10 inside school premises. (UNRWA)
- The leading causes of reported infant mortality in refugee children in 2005 were low birth weight and pre-maturity (31.2%), congenital malformations (21.1%) and acute respiratory infections (19.7%). (UNRWA)
- UNRWA operates 68 primary health care facilities inside camps and 57 outside camps. The agency wide ratio of health care facilities per 10,000 people was 2.9 in 2005 (dropping to as low as 1.3 in the West Bank), well below the regional average. (UNRWA)
- Only 84.3% of camps have access to sewerage facilities (ranging from 95.3% in Syrian Arab Republic to 62.7% in Gaza), leaving refugee children exposed to a range of diseases that may be contracted through contact with raw sewage. (UNRWA)



Refugee children call for the implementation of UN resolution 194. Deheisha Camp, Bethlehem.

WHO PROTECTS PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN?

One common thing we have with the other Palestinian children is that we are all children and have rights.
Ala', 12, Qalandia Camp, West Bank.

The UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP) was set up to provide 1948 refugees with 'protection and to facilitate durable solutions'. However it ceased to fulfill its mandate in the mid-1950s. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)³ was established to provide temporary humanitarian assistance for Palestine refugees. For the purposes of UNRWA operations they define a Palestine refugee as any person whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948 and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict, or subsequent hostilities. In the absence of a durable solution the UN General Assembly has repeatedly renewed UNRWA mandate most recently until 30 June 2011.



Refugee children call for the implementation of UN resolution 194. Deheisha Camp, Bethlehem.

In addition, UNRWA does not have an explicit mandate to provide comprehensive protection to Palestinian refugees and UNHCR only provides limited international protection to Palestinian refugees and only outside of UNRWA areas of operation. As such, no UN agency has searched for durable solutions for Palestinian refugees (namely repatriation, host country integration or resettlement based on international law and UN Resolutions 194 and 237), rather this has been left to the parties of the conflict. Palestinian refugee children therefore have no access to systematic and effective international protection. (BADIL)

³Established by United Nations General Assembly resolution 302 (IV) of 8 December 1949