

JORDAN

Displaced Iraqi children head back to school in Jordan

Sitting on the floor of a two-bedroom hut surrounded by freshly painted white pristine walls in one of Jordan's well-to-do suburbs, one would not realize that the seven-member Ikzaz family living here is sustained only by the goodwill of their neighbour, Um Jum'a. Without her help, the family would have no food, clothes or shelter.

Iraqi-born Armash Ikzaz (known as Abu Salem) and his family actually live in what used to be a chicken coup. "I took the chickens out and gave the Ikzaz family this place," explains the robust Um Jum'a with a wide smile. This family lived across the street in a tent for two years.

"I can't work, or I will be deported, I can't afford to buy my kids school books. We are lucky that they are in school," says the father of five young children. The only thing in his pocket is a paper from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees saying that he is an asylum seeker claiming refugee status.

Abu Salem and his family have been living in Jordan since 2004, when they fled their home country Iraq as a result of the political upheaval and ongoing violence there.

As we sit on the floor, four young girls huddle around their 34-year-old mother. The little seven-year-old boy, Salem, sits in a corner on his own, rubbing his swollen eyes – his yellowish pink colour indicates an allergy. His parents can't afford to take him to the doctor or to buy medication.

"Yes, we are happy to be in school," says 13-year-old Ikhlas, who lost several years of education. "However, I feel embarrassed in front of the other students because I can't buy all the books," adds the shy girl with long black hair. It costs about US\$ 70 to enrol each non-Jordanian child in a government school and an additional US\$ 15 to purchase textbooks. The only way Abu Salem's children got some of their books and paid part of the registration fees was through the goodwill of their neighbour Um Jum'a who collected money from other families to help her Iraqi tenants.

UNICEF has been instrumental in bringing about the decision of the Government of Jordan to allow displaced Iraqi children to enrol in school. There are about 750,000 displaced Iraqis in the country. Just fewer than 20,000 of the children attended Jordanian schools last year. UNICEF and its partners aim to get an additional 50,000 Iraqi children into school this year.

“They took the books away from me and told me when I could pay I would have them back,” says 12-year-old Rana. The eldest sister, Shifa’, says she has three books but a lot remain to be purchased. She does not seem motivated and is doing poorly at school.

Help with textbooks and school fees

UNICEF is currently finalizing with the Jordanian Ministry of Education a plan to supply Iraqi children with textbooks and to pay the school fees of children whose families cannot afford to do so. The already overcrowded classrooms cannot accommodate the new influx of students, however welcome they may be. UNICEF is therefore providing the Ministry with technical support to rent additional buildings to accommodate the students and to help implement double-shift schools. Teachers will also be trained to offer psychosocial support to Iraqi children.

The young Ikkaz children wake up in the early hours of the morning and walk for 45 minutes to reach school. “People think that, because we live in this area, we are rich and should be able to afford public transport,” discloses Shifa’. “We dread the coming months when the kids will have to walk to school in the merciless rain and bone-wrenching cold,” adds Um Jum’a.

For now, the Ikkaz family is waiting patiently, hoping that their plight will improve. Meanwhile, little Salem falls asleep. He has given up the battle with his eyes.