

NEWS NOTE

Palestinian youth in northern Lebanon head back to school two weeks into refugee camp crisis

UNICEF and UNRWA mobilize to meet crucial exam deadlines

BEIRUT, June 5, 2007 –As fighting continues in Nahr El Bared Palestinian refugee camp near Tripoli in north Lebanon, eight school buses are bringing some normalcy into the disrupted lives of youth affected by the conflict.

Supported by UNICEF and UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East), the buses are transporting approximately 1,000 Palestinian youth and teachers living in the nearby Beddawi refugee camp to UNRWA schools in the Tripoli area in three shifts each day. The buses began running on Saturday June 2 for the students' first day back at school since the Nahr El Bared conflict began on May 20.

Classes stopped in the Beddawi camp so that the schools could be converted to shelters for thousands of refugees fleeing the violence in Nahr El Bared camp, located approximately 11 km away. An estimated 21,000 people have left Nahr El Bared camp since the beginning of the conflict, and the majority of families are living in Beddawi camp – either in the schools or with host families. As a result, youth from both camps have missed school for almost two weeks at a very critical time in their academic calendar, since qualifying exams for girls and boys aged 14-18 are fast approaching.

For students in grade nine, the “Brevet” exam is mandatory before pursuing secondary school education. Senior students will be writing their Baccalaureate exams in order to qualify for post-secondary education (university).

Fitnat, one of the students preparing for the Brevet exam, says that she and her peers are happy to be back in school. “Getting to school helps secure our future – it is the only way for us,” she says.

One of the senior students, Hanan, is well aware of the importance of her upcoming Baccalaureate exam, saying that it will help determine her area of concentration in university. One of the Palestinian refugees who fled Nahr El-Bared camp in the conflict, Hanan's commitment to overcoming distressing circumstances is inspiring. “It is hard to leave your home three weeks before these exams,” she says. “But we will work hard to pass them.”

The return to school for youth is vital not only for academic reasons, but also to enhance emotional well-being in the midst of very difficult living conditions. To restore a sense of normalcy and routine for younger children, UNICEF is working with its partners to strengthen recreation programs and psychosocial support. In addition to distributing recreation kits to meet the needs of 3,000 children, more than 100 Palestinian youth have been trained and mobilized to facilitate games, drawing, painting, sports and other activities with their younger peers.

UNICEF Lebanon continues to dispatch emergency items, including water and sanitation supplies, for displaced Palestinian refugees and host families in north Lebanon. In cooperation

with UNRWA, UNICEF is also closely monitoring the emerging crisis situation in the Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp near Sidon in south Lebanon, where conflict has broken out and thousands of civilians are estimated to have fled. As in all conflict situations, UNICEF calls for the protection of children to be the first priority, including their safety and access to aid.

For more information, please contact:

Soha Bsati Boustani
Chief, Communication
UNICEF Lebanon Country Office
Mobile: 03 236 167
Email: sboustani@unicef.org

Nicole Ireland
Communication Specialist
UNICEF Lebanon Country Office
Mobile: 70 908 368
Email: nireland@unicef.org