

Summer camp in Lebanon for displaced Iraqi children

Contributed by AlertNet

Iraqi, Lebanese, and Palestinian children took part in a summer camp organized by Save the Children Sweden, in its first initiative to work with Iraqi refugees.

Thirty Iraqi, Lebanese, and Palestinian children were dancing, singing, performing sketches and fashion shows in a small house in the mountains above the town of Hermel in North Eastern Lebanon. The 4-day summer camp held from the 8th to the 12th of September supported by Save the Children Sweden was an initiative to provide children with a safe space where they could feel some normality in their, filled with activities and fun.

"We've had so much fun. I hope there will be other camps soon" said Emila Sheybo, a 12-year-old Iraqi refugee.

Emila is one of more than 2 million persons who have fled the violence in Iraq following the US-led invasion in 2003. The vast majority of them have been seeking refuge in Jordan and Syria. There are not official statistics but it is estimated that 40,000 Iraqis have fled to Lebanon. They have been granted prima facie refugee status and have the possibility of registering with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Yet, ensuring and protecting their rights to education, employment and health remains a challenge. Emila and her family have been living in the Lebanese capital of Beirut for two and a half year where her parents pay school fees for her to attend a private school. Emila never wants to return to Iraq, "I'm afraid of being kidnapped or killed in Iraq, yet at the same time I don't want to stay in Lebanon either. I don't know what will happen in the future" she says.

Few displaced Iraqi families can afford the private school fees. Even former wealthy Iraqis are now running out of money after living for years as refugees. Thirteen year old Mariam Kaneni has been living with her parents and three siblings in a one room apartment in a poor suburb of Beirut for two and a half years. "I am studying in a private school. A non governmental organization pays the fee. One day I hope there will be peace in Iraq so I can return to my relatives" says Mariam.

There are many Iraqi children who never leave their homes in Lebanon, for a number of reasons that include fear of being arrested by the police for not having a residence visa. As Emila explains, "We are six persons living in two small rooms where I spend most of my time after school. I'm not leaving our home very often because I don't feel safe outside and I don't have any Lebanese friends."

The main purpose of the summer camp is to provide a safe space for children to play, learn about each other, and express themselves. Out of the 30 children participating in the summer camp, half are Iraqi and the others Lebanese and Palestinian refugees. The vast majority of the estimated 400,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon live in refugee camps and gatherings. Most of the Iraqis residing in Lebanon have taken up homes in the poorer areas of the cities and have few contacts with Lebanese. The summer camp was an excellent opportunity for the Iraqi children to interact with locals and Palestinians as Emila expressed "at the camp I've met both Lebanese and Palestinian children that have become my friends." Mariam described the camp as an opportunity for all of them to "learn more about each other and each others countries."

There is no doubt that the children have appreciated the activities at the summer camp, "the coolest thing has been to live in the same room with two other nationalities and having fun with them" said Ali Alam, a 14-year-old Lebanese. Dala Abdel Razek a 13-year-old Palestinian refugee said that mixing with children from the different nationalities was an enriching experience "we have realized that we are all the same."

In addition to activities and play, the camp was an opportunity for children to discuss their rights, focusing on how they perceived their own rights as individuals and as children. Mariam Kaneni expressed that "all children have the right to health care, to eat and not to be abused by adults." Thirteen year old Ranjwa Bleibel added "and education is a basic right for everyone."

There are tens of thousands displaced Iraqi children in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria who do not have access to education. "Even if these countries haven't signed the UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, they have signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child which includes the right to education. If governments do not have the resources to support displaced children, we will do everything we can to help them. If Sweden received hundreds of thousands refugees in a short period of time, it would be a big challenge for Sweden. This is what has happened in countries like Jordan, Syria and Lebanon" said Sanna Johnsson, Regional Representative of Save the Children Sweden in Beirut. Save the Children Alliance aims to support between 10,000 to 50,000 Iraqi children by 2010 with special emphasis on vulnerable children in need of protection in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.

In June 2007 Save the Children Sweden began working with Iraqi children; the lack of reliable statistics about Iraqis in Lebanon has been a great obstacle. Many of them have not registered with the UNHCR due to fear of being deported. Volunteers from Save the Children Sweden's Lebanese partner organisations undertook a mapping and identification

exercise during the summer and spoke to more than 180 Iraqi children. 31 per cent stated that they were not enrolled in a school for the upcoming year, 37 per cent were not enrolled in school during the 2006-7 school year, 17 per cent were working and 45 per cent stated they had faced some kind of problem including depression, violence, detention and discrimination. "We will make sure that the children who do not have access to education can enrol in schools this autumn. There are several schools that are willing to receive them, mainly private and semi-private schools" says Sanna Johnsson.

Save the Children Sweden aims to ensure the right to education of all children. Save the Children Sweden and its partners will provide Iraqi children with after school support, remedial classes and psychosocial support.

[Any views expressed in this article are those of the writer and not of Reuters.]