

WITNESS

09



MAP
MEDICAL AID FOR PALESTINIANS



Dear Supporter,

Palestinian experience is invariably linked with exile and dispossession. First in 1948, Palestinians fled their homes in Palestine, leaving their towns and villages to escape conflict. Almost 60 years later, third and fourth generations of refugees continue to face insecurity and poverty in camps in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, as well as camps in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.

MAP's work began in the Palestinian refugee camps during the years of civil war in Lebanon, but has since expanded to the West Bank and Gaza, where MAP also focuses on supporting local partners working with refugees. In this issue of Witness, we explore the continued displacement of Palestinians, focusing on Lebanon, and on Palestinians fleeing persecution in Iraq.

The near total destruction of Nahr el Bared camp in Lebanon during the intense fighting that took place over the last months highlights the paradox that refugee camps often offer little safety or refuge from conflict. According to the United Nations, over thirty thousand refugees were displaced from Nahr al Bared. Most fled to Beddawi, and other Palestinian camps further south. MAP will continue to respond to the direct needs of Nahr al Bared refugees over the next months, long after the world's attention has shifted away. Fleeing persecution and ongoing conflict in Baghdad, hundreds of Palestinians remain stranded on the Iraqi side of the Syrian-Iraqi border. Following initial reports on the conditions in new camps such as Al Tanf and Al Waleed, MAP conducted an assessment of medical needs, leading to increased medical access for these new refugees.

We thank you for your continued support, which enables MAP to effectively respond to both the existing and new needs of Palestinian refugees

Darrin Waller
Chief Executive Officer
Medical Aid for Palestinians

November 2007

IN THE DESERT: NEW PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS IN IRAQ

Al-Waleed: on the Iraqi side of the Iraq-Syria border

- 1,400 Palestinian refugees
- Insufficient food and limited water supplies
- MAP provides a doctor for the camp

Al-Tanf: between the borders of Iraq and Syria

- 350 Palestinian refugees
- Harsh desert conditions have led to a deterioration in health

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OVERVIEW: IN THE DESERT

STUCK IN THE DESERT

PALESTINIAN REFUGEES ON THE BORDER OF IRAQ

Palestinians, as a vulnerable minority community, have been caught up in the violence that has embraced Iraq following the 2003 invasion. The threat of kidnapping or murder has forced hundreds of Palestinian families to pack up whatever belongings they could carry and head towards the Syrian border. Unable to cross into Syria, their final destination has become the tented camps at al-Waleed and al-Tanf.

Following reports of the conditions in the camps, MAP conducted a basic needs assessment of the situation in June 2007.

Al-Waleed

In Al-Waleed camp, just inside the Iraqi border and away from the international media spotlight, a stretch of inhospitable desert has become 'home' to approximately 1,400 Palestinian refugees.

What is immediately clear is the escalating nature of the humanitarian crisis that is emerging. In March 2007, the camp population had numbered around 500. Seven months later and that number had almost trebled to an estimated population of 1,400, of which 135 are children under the age of 5. This number may well increase, with more Palestinians fleeing harassment and persecution, as well as the general insecurity in Iraq.

Conditions in al-Waleed are dire. There is an imminent threat of death, kidnapping and harassment from local militias, the Iraqi army and those who wield power in the area. There have been reports of groups entering the camp and shooting into tents and high levels of psychological trauma are prevalent amongst the refugees.

When MAP visited the camp in June 2007, refugees reported that there was not sufficient food and that what was available was of very poor quality. The water supply is limited to one litre per refugee per day and problems with the water tanks mean that gastrointestinal infections are common.



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This is juxtaposed with sanitation problems. In one section there are only 20 toilets for 661 people. There are no showers, and the overall standard of hygiene in the camp is poor.

There is no electricity in the camp aside from a handful of generators brought there by the refugees. With temperatures reaching 50c in the summer months, the lack of electricity to power cooling and refrigeration systems posed a serious threat. Due to the lack of electricity in the camp, medicines cannot be stored safely.

Chronic illnesses among the refugees include high blood pressure, respiratory problems, hypertension, and psychological problems such as depression. At

the time of MAP's assessment, there was only one doctor present in the camp to treat all the refugees. The nearest hospital is four hours away in the border town of al-Qaim in Iraq. In addition to the distance, the journey is precarious given that the only road runs through virtually lawless territory.

MAP's study realised that conditions for refugees in al-Waleed need to be improved urgently. We have already funded a much-needed doctor who is visiting the camp for two days a week. At present, this will be funded for a three-month period, with a further assessment based on the longer-term plans for the camp. MAP will fund medicines and disposable items for the refugees in al-Waleed based on the doctor's advice.



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MAP is also currently funding two extra visits per month by the camp's gynaecologist. These will take place for an initial three month period, at the end of which we will evaluate the situation in the camp and assess whether or not there is a continued need for additional visits.

MAP's assessment also uncovered an urgent need for psychological support and trauma counselling for a large number of the refugees in al-Waleed. MAP has also identified the need for a dentist, as well as nurses and a health clinic equipped with running water and electricity so that medicines can be stored.

Al-Waleed, given the lack of basic supplies and infrastructure as well as the constant threat of

attack from local militias, is currently in desperate need. A longer term solution should be provided with assistance from the international community, in accordance with international law. While the refugees in al-Waleed are traumatised and face continued insecurity, the prevailing sentiments among the refugees are those universal to human beings: the need to have somewhere to call home, and the need to provide for the safety, education and well-being of their children. The words of a refugee in al-Waleed, Jamil Ahmed Mahmud, are those on the lips of everyone in the camp; "Our dearest wish is to get out of the camp".

Al-Tanf

In May 2006 dozens of Palestinian refugees fleeing violence in Iraq arrived in the 'no-man's land' between the Iraqi-Syrian borders. Denied entry into Syria, these refugees were forced to set up camp next to the highway. What has become the Al Tanf refugee camp clusters along the Baghdad to Damascus highway a few metres from the crossing into Syria. After 350 Palestinians arrived here seeking refuge, the Syrians closed off further access for Palestinians.

Al-Tanf refugee camp is a dangerous place for vulnerable refugees. The highway traffic, the limited space, the close monitoring by Syrian authorities as well as the desert climate make this a highly unsuitable and inhospitable place for a refugee camp.

The camp lies on strip of land 7km in length and only 100 metres wide. Walls and barbed wire surround it and the movement of Palestinian refugees is restricted to within this area with only the sick allowed to leave to go on the three hour journey to hospitals in Damascus. The distance makes any emergency treatment not provided in the camp impossible to receive. Following treatment, they are returned to al-Tanf camp.

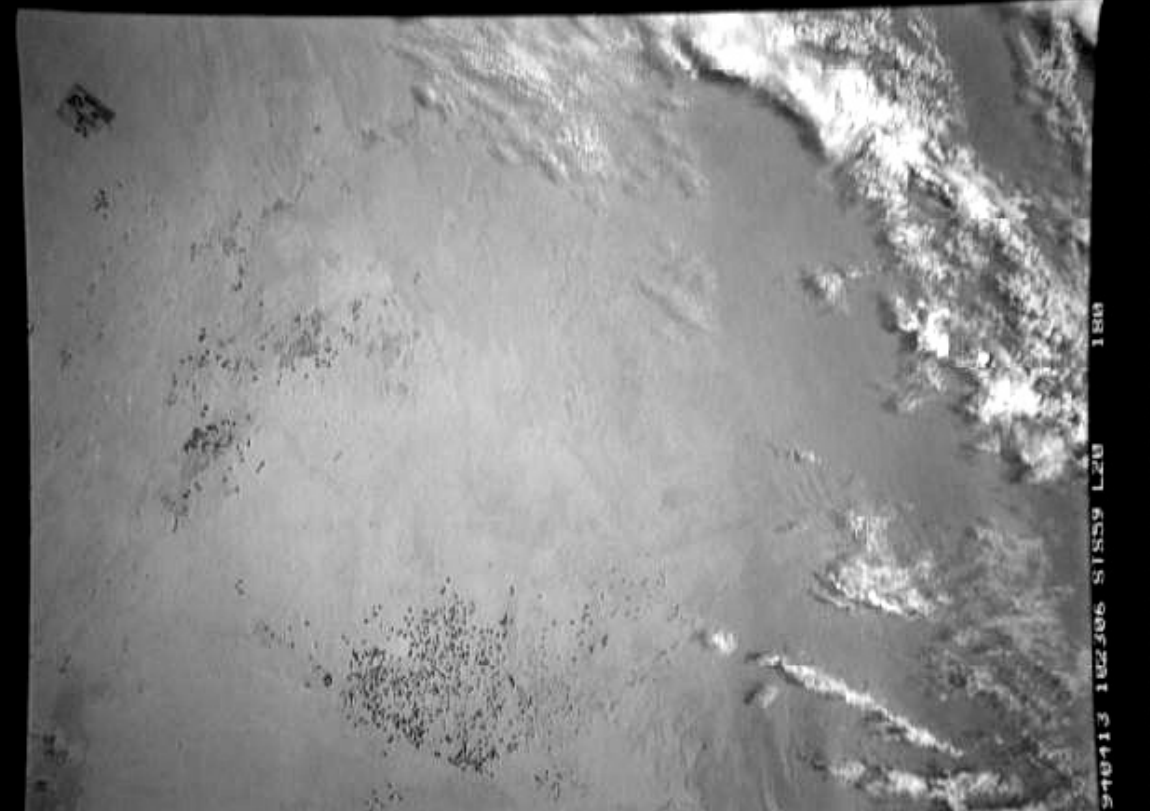
The harsh desert conditions have led to deterioration in standards of health with many complaining of new illnesses caused by the environment, as well as stress and psychological pressure. The climate of the desert is unremitting and compounds any health problems already existent within the camp's population. In addition the desert is home to snakes, spiders, scorpions, sandstorms, extreme weather and frequent outbreaks of fire.

All of the refugees have expressed an urgent desire to leave al-Tanf. Many have considered travelling up to the Turkish border, where they will almost certainly face a similar situation. However, the dire conditions in Al-Tanf, coupled with the sense of helplessness means that many of the refugees are willing to take this chance, feeling that they have little to lose.

Whilst the priority for these refugees is adequate resettlement, they need to be offered more activities and psychological assistance. This October, thirty of the eighty families living in al-Tanf accepted an offer of asylum in Sudan. Until a solution is found for the remaining families, medical assistance must continue to be provided.



Nasa image of the area where al-Waleed and al-Tanf camps are located. The distinct lack of distinguishing geographical features gives an idea of how inhospitable the terrain is.





DARREN WINDSOR SPEAKING OUT

FLOWERS AND MEDICINES

In the Gaza Strip, over three-quarters of the current estimated population of some 1.4 million are registered refugees. The refugee camps in the Gaza Strip have one of the highest population densities in the world.

“In September this year Israel declared Gaza a hostile entity. Since then the amount of people and goods leaving and entering the strip has reduced to a dribble. MAP's Darren Windsor was there for a week that same month and recounts his experience of the Erez crossing:

Leaving Gaza City after a few days visiting MAP partner and projects in the strip, we drove north and arrived at Erez crossing. We arrived at 4pm, but spent two hours waiting for permission to cross back into Israel. This wait time is not unusual; in fact, we have come to expect much longer, if we are even able to cross at all.

While we waited, I watched as a trail of severely ill Palestinians crossed back into Gaza, returning home after a day seeking medical treatment in Israel. Treatments that are not available, or have become unavailable, in the Gaza Strip. Many were in wheelchairs, unable to walk. Others tried their best to navigate the crossing while still having intravenous drips in their arms. Some patients were luckily assisted by a relative, but most had to make their way through the maze of barriers on their own. Patients unable to walk waited in

turn for a single wheelchair to be available, while I saw one man - with an intravenous drip - being transported in a baggage cart. Relatives wait anxiously on the other side.

Erez crossing is difficult to describe, because unless you have seen it, you cannot comprehend its scale, and the array of barriers, turnstiles, cameras and fenced sections. Unless you have been through it, you will not experience its dehumanisation, the sense that you are being processed. The maze of barriers and cages reminded me most of the cattle abattoir I worked on as a young boy in north Queensland, Australia.

But those passing through are human. While most seemed resigned to this procedure, I was struck by the look of relief evident on the faces of those coming back into Gaza; the sense of humiliation, frustration and anger which they must have been feeling seemed secondary to the relief of rejoining their loved ones. Seeing this made me consider all that we take for granted in our lives, seemingly normal or routine aspects of life which for the residents of Gaza are a struggle, a struggle which involves long waits and constant uncertainty.

'Security' is cited as the blanket reason for all the hours of wait, the denials of entry or exit. This not only directly affects those seeking medical treatment, but touches most aspects of life, including industry and trade. Recently, half a million carnations were held up at Karni, the crossing used for

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MAP was one of the only NGOs allowed into Nahr al Bared camp during the worst outbreak of violence since the Lebanese Civil War. Following the cessation of violence the following legacy was left:

- **90% of camp infrastructure destroyed or badly damaged**
- **85% of houses destroyed**
- **5,449 families affected**
- **32,000 refugees displaced from the camp**
- **Estimated 1 year until rubble and unexploded ordnance is removed**
- **UNRWA appealing for £25 million to meet the Palestinian refugees basic needs over the next year.**

Sources: UNRWA, New York Times

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OVERS

exports and other goods. The flowers rotted as they were kept from export for 'security reasons'. They then had to be destroyed. The Israeli government would be hard pressed to explain the security threat posed by flowers. This illustrated to me, perhaps more than anything else, that the closures relate more to punishment than to a consideration of Israeli security.

Karni crossing has now been closed for well over six weeks. As a result, the private economy of Gaza, the creator of wealth in any country, is virtually at a stand still. Over 80% of private industry in Gaza has had to shut down and the rest is similarly on the verge of collapse. In England, we routinely see large trucks delivering foodstuffs and other goods. Our shops and supermarkets are full, and the produce arrives from dozens of countries. In Gaza, local industries are near collapse, and imports and exports are subject to impossible restrictions. Without the ability to trade and to transport goods from the seller to the buyer, the people of Gaza will always be suffering. ”

Darren Windsor is MAP UK's Head of Finance



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