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In this issue:

Palestinian children under curfew: As they grow, their dreams must shrink

Training despite the dangers

Weekly sit-in for release of prisoners

A young widow overcomes

Guide Mothers: A successful project of Allud Charitable Association

Mother of prisoners: A symbol of the Palestinian woman

Itaf Shaheen: waiting for her fiancé for 14 years

Wife of a wanted man faces her fear

Palestinian children under curfew: As they grow, their dreams must shrink

A report prepared by Save the Children (UK and Sweden) on the impact of the current crisis of children indicates that they experience fear about their present and do not have big expectations of the future. A female student said, 'I live in fear and terror. I ask the children of the world if any of them live a situation like this. Certainly not! The situation is very bad and death is more honorable.' Another one said, 'I envy those children who live far from our suffering; we are isolated from the rest of the world.'

The report covered kindergarten and school education, health issues and risks facing disabled children. The sampled children (384 students) were asked to draw their way to school and write three lines on their expectations of their economic, academic and family future. They were also asked to describe their daily life.

On how they spend their lives, a student wrote, 'Last night the shelling was intense; I called to my mother because I was scared. I found all my brothers and sisters with her. I could not sleep until 3.00 am. In the morning, I woke up extremely tired and looked from the window to see if we could go to school that day. It was not possible, so I went back to bed.'

Children asserted that they were harassed and searched by soldiers on their way to school, if allowed to go to school at all. One student said, 'There was a tank on the way to school. A soldier took my schoolbag and threw my books in the street. They got wet. I said to the soldier, 'Why are you doing this?' He said, 'Shut up!' and put the books back in the bag. Then he said, 'Go to school!'

Children also reported fear and a reduced attention span. They said they forget information easily, especially during exam time. They are afraid of the sounds they hear all day long and when the army patrols pass. They are afraid of the sounds

coming out of microphones. A student said, 'I was very good at school; now I am dumb.'

The report also showed an increase in the level of violence among children, teachers and parents. It revealed reading and writing difficulties although it also demonstrated that children are quite aware of the importance of education.

The results of the study are shocking. There is an urgent need for intervention to mitigate the impact of this war on our children and address their suffering. Otherwise, the occupation will remain not only on the land, but also in their souls.

Training despite the dangers

The Israeli occupation has caused destruction to buildings and humans alike, which is reflected in the general attitude in the street. People's lives are characterized by danger and the occupation generates fear day and night. Nonetheless, women leaders have remained determined, waking up early to traveling from their villages and refugee camps to the training centers despite the difficulties encountered at the numerous checkpoints. Although the distance to Jenin is short, the journey is now often impossible, and the road home is also full of troubles. Women also have to deal with the difficulty of leaving their children behind at home, with the constant threat of closure or siege being imposed at any moment. Their return home can be impeded for long hours. Despite all of this, they come to the training courses with determination not to succumb to the agenda of the occupation but instead to impose the women's agenda amidst the blockade and ruins.

Holding a training course on how to manage elections campaigns, under such circumstances, boosts the morale of women interested in gaining such skills. These courses are part of the preparations for general and municipal elections with the objective of empowering women to run as candidates and to vote. The mood at the training was positive and energetic: another achievement by Palestinian women under occupation.

Weekly sit-in for release of prisoners

The same photographs of the same people appear every week at the sit-in of detainees' families at Baladna Cultural Center. However, this week the scene was different. Mothers and families of detainees sat on seats under an olive green tent that made the scene even gloomier. There were pictures of sons and husbands looking towards the unknown horizon; and the same question was voiced: 'Will these prisoners be released one day?'

The Israeli government creates absurd classifications for prisoners revealing its intention to keep the majority of the prisoners in jail indefinitely on the pretext that their hands are 'red with the blood of Israelis.'

Um Namr Alsafadi from Jerusalem has her eldest son, Nimr, in an Israeli jail. He was detained 14 years ago and sentenced to 20 years at Asqalan prison. Still, she considers herself 'lucky' because she can visit him regularly unlike the families of other detainees from Gaza and the West Bank who have to go through numerous checkpoints and are never sure they will be allowed to visit.

Many prisoners do not see their children born while they are in jail; others lose family members. So, who will help them and their families?

A young widow overcomes

She is barely twenty years old and extremely beautiful. The shock of the death of her husband has ended all chances of a normal life. She hears the gossip about her.

Her first confrontation with the world was four months after her husband died. During these four months, she stayed at home only receiving those coming to pay their respects. She saw questions in the eyes of her late husband's relatives and neighbors who claimed they were coming to help her get through her pain. All the questions were about who would be the new husband, who will raise her child with her and get to have her. The problem is that the neighbors and relatives want her husband's elder brother to marry her. He is twice her age and is still in jail while his family and children are impatiently waiting for him.

She has always viewed him as a big brother and therefore refused this solution insisting that she does not need a 'substitute' husband and that she can raise her child on her own. She wore her wedding ring again to remind everyone that they cannot make her marry against her will.

The first time she went out after her husband's death was to receive his death certificate and to change her ID details to 'widow' instead of 'married.'

Since then, every time she wants to go out she has to ask her father-in-law, who has started interfering in the smallest details of her life on the pretext that he is the only one responsible for her and her child because he provides for them.

She told her father-in-law that she will take responsibility for herself and for her baby. She has gone back to school, determined to work to provide a decent life for her boy. It was difficult at the beginning, the gossip was so ruthless. She continues her life, but still has not taken off the black dress of a widow.

Guide Mothers: A successful project of Allud Charitable Association

Allud Charitable Association celebrates the graduation of the third group of "Guide Mothers" from the project that has been running for the past five years. The project focuses on mothers and children and aims to train mothers to protect their rights and their children's rights, targeting mainly women who have not had the opportunity to

continue their education. Two hundred and sixty mothers participated in the project over the past year.

The project has trained more than 60 mothers from the Nablus refugee camps and surrounding areas, 30 of whom have been chosen to act as counselors to another 200 mothers. The training covers nutrition and the physical, psychological and social development of children.

Participants said the project help them gain confidence and developed their skills for dealing with their children and with the society in general. A manual was also developed to help the mothers improve their skills.

Mother of prisoners: A symbol of the Palestinian woman

Um Jabr Wishah is seventy-five years old; she has never been to school and does not know how to read or write, yet she is not illiterate. She is like many mothers who try to get their sons released from Israeli prisons. While her son, Jabr, was still imprisoned she adopted another prisoner, Sameer Qintar. She fought for both cases. For her efforts, she has been called ‘mother of prisoner.’

She comes across powerfully in the media and has an excellent ability to communicate her message. Today, she is calling upon all forces to mobilize for the release of all prisoners, regardless of the outcomes of the two cases she is working on. She provides a good symbol of the Palestinian mother, whose role is not limited to her own children, but she becomes a defender of the national cause and carries this responsibility with determination and faith.

Itaf Shaheen: waiting for her fiancé for 14 years

After he came into the court room, she sat next to him. He said, ‘I feel the judgment will be harsh.’

‘He suggested we break our engagement because he feared it would be unjust for me.’ Itaf Mohammad Shaheen, 38, lives in Jerusalem, though her family originates from Jafa. She recalls with grief the difficult times when her fiancé Mahmoud Alsafadi appeared before the Israeli courts 14 years ago. She said, ‘It was a difficult time, but I totally refused to break our engagement.’

Mahmoud, who has been imprisoned for 14 years, was arrested in February 1989 by the Israeli occupation forces and was tried with the charge of affiliation with Palestinian organizations. A year before he was detained, in October 1988, he proposed to Itaf and their relation flourished.

She says, ‘When he was arrested, I was shocked. He stayed in the interrogation center at Al Maskoubiah Prison for six months during which I could not see him. He was subjugated to all forms of physical and psychological torture.’

Itaf, who works at a center for rehabilitation of the disabled in Jerusalem, remembers the day the verdict was given in Allud court. She says, 'After the sentence of 27 year in prison was pronounced, the judge asked Mahmoud to comment on the verdict. He commented, 'The one who should be tried and sentenced is your Prime Minister because his hands are red with the blood of our people.'

She still continues her engagement to him and keeps hoping that he and all prisoners will be released.

Wife of a wanted man faces her fear

Suheir Alrimawi from Bieth Rima to the northwest of Ramallah is 28 years old. She and her children have been targeted by the occupation forces that continually raid their house on the pretext of searching for her husband. However, she continues to rise above her suffering and re-enrolled in school after 12 years of interruption. She passed her Baccalaureate exams under extremely difficult conditions because of the siege and curfews imposed by the occupation. She is now preparing to register for university. She remembers her husband's and in-laws' support. She says, 'When the raids of our house and neighboring houses were intensified as the Israeli occupation looked for my husband, when fear spread in our hearts and affected our children especially, I grew stronger and even more determined to succeed.' Even her children, Iyad, Majed and Ahmad understood her interest in education and supported her.

Suheir is one of many wives of martyrs, prisoners and wanted men, who continue to seek light amidst the suffering of life under occupation.