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PALESTINIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON

by Rosemary Sayigh

LIBANON(32)

Introductory Note

Rosemary Sayigh is a Beirut-based anthropologist, researcher, and author. Her most recent work, *Too Many Enemies : The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon*, was published in 1994. The following is the text of her presentation to the annual symposium of the North American Coordinating Committee of NGOs on the Question of Palestine (NACC), held at the United Nations in New York on June 24-26. It is reprinted with the permission of the author, courtesy of the Middle East Working Group (MEWG), a coalition of Canadian NGOs which coordinated a Canadian speaking tour with Ms. Sayigh.

A. THE INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

Demographers estimate that more than two thirds of the Palestinian people are refugees. Whether outside or inside pre- 1948 Palestine, the refugees are currently facing decisions concerning their fate taken in an international and regional context marked by US-Israeli domination, Arab state detachment, moves to dismantle the legal and institutional framework of refugee rights, and Palestinian fragmentation.

Though these developments are negative for all the refugees, I intend to restrict my presentation to the refugees in Lebanon, whose situation is marked by a special vulnerability, and where authorities oppose short-term improvement in their status, as well as their ultimate settlement.

B. OVERVIEW: THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON

- 1) Civic Rights: Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are denied civic rights, not allowed to work or travel freely, and excluded from public services (medical, educational, social security). Rights to residence and camp space are insecure.
- 2) Crisis of representation: Since Oslo, Palestinians in Lebanon lack representation whether at the national or local level: the PNA does not represent the refugees; the PLO delegation to the Multilateral Working Group on Refugees represents the refugees in general but is not concerned with Lebanon's specificity. The PLO's office in Beirut has been closed since 1982.
- 3) New travel restrictions: Decreed after the Libyan expulsions of 1995, new regulations oblige refugees wishing to travel to apply for visas of exit and re-entry. More damaging, re-entry visas have to be renewed every six months, placing heavy burdens on 'Lebanese' Palestinians who work abroad. The new regulations inhibit Palestinian travel through the high cost of visas and 'extras', as well as through making other countries reluctant to allow Palestinians entry or employment.
- 4) Restrictions on space: As well as new camps, the authorities have vetoed the reconstruction of camp housing; in consequence, UNRWA has largely frozen improvement of public facilities. Refugees displaced by war have been evicted from illegal accommodation but no new low-cost housing has been provided. Camp space is insufficient, and environmental conditions - lack of public electricity, over-crowding, sewage-seepage, polluted drinking water - are hazardous to health, particularly of children. Public construction schemes threaten several camps with complete or partial demolition.
- 5) Un- and under-employment: Product of Lebanese work laws, Palestinian unemployment has always been higher in Lebanon than in other host countries, though lack of comprehensive surveys makes it impossible to give precise figures. All but a small minority of refugees are excluded from professional and skilled technical employment. Available work is mainly manual, irregular and daily- paid, or in petty commerce in camps. Such conditions have

lowered the overall income of the community and increased the incidence of 'hardship cases', with negative effects on health, educational investment, skill levels, and morale.

6) The health crisis: Currently estimated the most serious problem facing the refugees in Lebanon is insufficient access to hospitalization. This is a result of: i) the high cost of private Lebanese hospitals; ii) exclusion of refugees from state hospitals; iii) decline in the number and quality of services of hospitals run by the PRCS; and iv) relative decline in UNRWA's subsidies for hospitalization. Health levels are also affected by war-stress, environmental deprivation, and poverty.

7) The education crisis: Serious in its implications for the future, the symptoms are:

- a) A decreasing percentage of children of school age in school, especially post-primary levels. The exact dimensions of the shortfall are unknown, but UNRWA's educational statistics show that twice as many children are in school in Syria, though Syria has a lower refugee population.
- b) Decline in student ability due to overcrowded classes, the double shift, staff shortages, and parental unconcern.
- c) Restricted provision of secondary and tertiary level education.
- d) High rates of illiteracy in the adult population, results of years of war.

8) Decline in external aid: Over the last five years all the major sources have declined:

- a) UNRWA: Apart from a slightly higher number of 'hardship cases', the Agency's allocations to the Lebanon field have not yet taken account of special hardship. Recent years have seen reductions in relief and services. The post-Oslo concentration of international aid on Gaza is also reflected in UNRWA expenditures.
- b) the PLO: Before 1982 the largest employer as well as source of free services, scholarships and indemnities, the PLO had cut almost all such aid by mid-1993.
- c) Aid from other sources - UN agencies, international NGOs - also declined after 1991, when the international community believed that the Palestinian problem was solved.

Because of work law constraints, Palestinians in Lebanon have always depended on many sources of income besides wages - migrant remittances, external aid, subsidized services. All these sources are currently in decline, yet Palestinians have to live in a highly inflationary economy.

Before moving to look at the local NGOs as a hopeful factor in a bleak landscape, it is important to note the fragmentation of external aid, a mosaic of mostly small programs with partial views, little inter-communication, a short time-horizon, and no overall development strategy.

C. FILLING THE GAP: THE LOCAL (PALESTINIAN) NGOS

1. Background

Increase in the number of local Palestinian NGOs since 1982 is a community response to the gravity of the situation and to the void left by evacuation of the PLO. Five before 1982, NGOs today are more than 17. They are characterized by:

- a. Heterogeneity of orientation, size, services offered, resources, partnerships. Projects have been chosen by NGOs without prior research or overall plan. This has led to clustering in some fields, absence in others e.g. nine NGOs run kindergartens, while only four work in the field of health, and none in human rights.
- b. Lebanese legal status: Since Palestinians don't have the right to form their own

associations, Palestinian NGOs have to register under Lebanese law, with restrictions on membership, direction, and employment.

A 'Coordinating Forum' was recently established, assembling around 17 local NGOs that meet regularly, and have formed specialized joint subcommittees. Some backers of the 'Forum' would like to see it produce a development strategy, both for NGO work and for the community, but it isn't certain that the 'Forum' has this ambition or capacity.

Another recent development was the formation in March 1995 of the Palestinian NGO Refugee Advocacy Group (PNRAG), bringing together NGOs from Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. PNRAG is focussed on the refugees, based on the right of return, aware of local specificities and daily life problems faced by the refugees. It is also the first unifying force since Oslo.

Among the most formidable obstacles facing the local NGOs are: i) the disproportion between the community's needs and NGO resources - financial and human; ii) insecurity of future, financial and political, dependence on yearly budgets and official toleration; iii) lack of special skills (e.g. economic, legal, administrative) required to develop their own capacities and the situation of the community; iv) some aspects of international NGO behavior, e.g. their fickleness, susceptibility to fashion, preference for start-up projects and dislike of supporting running costs.

2. How can NGO Work Develop?

The first necessity is to take an accurate measure of Lebanese constraints so as to chart a space for development. This is not easy given the restricted nature of Lebanese-Palestinian dialogue and the absence of clear government policy. Experience suggests that some parts of the state and some areas of life are much harsher than others (for example, the new visa rules, operated by the Directorate of General Security). Experience also shows that the Government of Lebanon is likely to veto: i) high profile projects that suggest towteen (permanent settlement of the refugees in Lebanon); and ii) any large plan to improve living conditions. These vetoes stem from the belief that visible refugee misery is the only way to remind the world that Lebanon bears this burden. Poverty is also a form of pressure on the refugees to emigrate. The issue of civic rights might be more amenable to international campaigning, given the slur it casts on Lebanon's image.

If this analysis is correct, it leaves a margin of space for community development. Insecure though their situation is, Palestinian NGOs have not been prevented from working in the camps, nor from holding seminars and exhibitions, meeting foreign delegations, making films, doing research. In the opinion of one community activist, the local NGOs could do much more with their resources, but the exaggerated idea they have of government impediments stops them from trying to develop. For example, no one stops them from building stronger alliances with Lebanese NGOs. In spite of difficulties inherited from the past, such rapprochement is possible. It would strengthen the legitimacy of Palestinian NGOs, and help to develop new areas of work.

If we look at 'facts on the ground', the picture that emerges has positive as well as negative elements, suggesting that there is space - however restricted - for development work, and that the Palestinian community has not lost its creative energy. Most of the projects I shall cite involve inside/outside partnerships and triangular relationships that could be a formula for strengthening the scope and relevance of NGO work:

- a) The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) has recently financed a training program for NGO personnel, with Palestinian participation written into the contract. This is positive because after 1982 some international agencies ran separate programs for Lebanese and Palestinians, while others ignored Palestinians altogether.
- b) The European Community has pledged support for a technical training program for Palestinian youth, to be undertaken by a local NGO specialized in this field. This has not been vetoed by the government.

- c) In partnership with a local camp women's NGO, UNRWA is facilitating some new as well as old kinds of preprofessional training for women. UNRWA pays starting costs and signs graduation certificates, the local NGO will eventually take over running costs.
- d) Training centres will take place this summer for Palestinian kindergarten teachers, and for social workers. In each case, funding will come from an international donor, and the program be administered by a Palestinian NGO together with a Lebanese NGO or institution. Such triangular partnerships could be a way ahead.

D. WHAT CAN NORTH AMERICAN NGOS DO?

1. Organize to protect UN resolutions on the refugees national and human rights.
2. Mobilize Palestinian and Arab communities of North America and their media around the refugee rights to choice.
3. Lobby representatives of the Lebanese Government to give Palestinians civic rights and to abolish travel restrictions.
4. Mobilize on the necessity for UNRWA to be maintained, its services to the refugees strengthened, and its allocations reviewed.
5. Form an information task force to visit refugee communities.
6. Assist the setting up of a human rights NGO in Lebanon.
7. Send youth volunteers to work with Palestinian NGOs in Lebanon, e.g. in children's summer camps or teaching English.

Appendix I - HEALTH SERVICES

Currently UNRWA assists hospitalization through contracts with 8 general hospitals, 100 beds, total coverage. For cases requiring specialized treatment, UNRWA is contracted with one Beirut hospital, Hotel Dieu, and pays LL 300,000 (\$180) per day towards costs. This rate of subsidy is guaranteed until end 1997 by special donations. UNRWA also has a 'life-saver' scheme for special cases, \$3000 per case. (The minimum cost of open-heart surgery in Lebanon is \$7,000.

The PCRS currently operates five hospitals, barely functioning because of low salaries, staff reduction, shortage of medical supplies.

Local NGOs offer: physical therapy, clinics in war-displaced areas, dental services to school children, nursing training.

Appendix II - EDUCATIONAL STATISTICS (UNRWA 1993-94)

Item	Lebanon	Syria
Total number of refugees	338,290	327,263
Number of children in school	33,647	61,263
Number of schools	77	109
Number of teachers	1,179	1,626
