

UNRWA takes aim at violence in refugee schools

New rules apply to teachers at Palestinian camps in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, occupied territories

By IRIN News.org

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AMMAN: The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestinian refugees has launched an initiative to combat violence in its schools in Lebanon and elsewhere across the Middle East by teaching children tolerance and conflict resolution, but teachers and refugees doubt the scheme will work in the poverty-stricken camps.

A new code of conduct was unveiled in the Jordanian capital, Amman, last month by senior UNRWA officials. The code is designed to govern relations between teachers and students as well as parents, in order to promote disciplined and violence-free schools.

UNRWA-run schools in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, the Occupied West Bank and Gaza will be governed by the new code, set up by students themselves through their own parliament, according to Matar Saqer, UNRWA spokesman in Amman.

"We are trying to turn the school into a safe and stimulating place and create a school conducive to teaching and the learning process. We want schools where children can learn and teachers can teach," Saqer told **IRIN**.

"UNRWA has been working with its teachers to update the technical instructions in order to make sure that schools are a safe haven for children, so that they can enjoy the learning process," he added.

The agency, which supports nearly 40 schools catering for 70,000 students in Jordan alone, first started a program to combat school violence in 2002 by teaching children human rights and conflict resolution as well as tolerance.

Mater said violence includes corporal punishment. He conceded that efforts would probably face roadblocks due to the deeply rooted culture of punishment in society, particularly in refugee camps, where poverty is widespread.

"We appreciate the difficulties, and being aware of difficulties does not mean we do not address the problem," he said, adding that many cases of violence go unreported, making it even harder for schools and social workers to tackle the issue.

Most of the 4.6 million Palestinian refugees living in poor camps across the Middle East have daily been exposed to violent and insecure conditions, with some still suffering, said UNRWA Education Director Kabir Shaikh.

"Children in Gaza and the West Bank see violence. At least they should feel safe at school," he said.

In one of the schools for boys at the Baqaa refugee camp, physical punishment is a routine practice for many teachers, who insist such a harsh environment requires them to act in this way to discipline large classes.

"Most children are used to being beaten by their parents; it has become fruitless to speak to most of them and expect a result," said one teacher, who argued that their teaching was now threatened by the new rules.

Teachers at Baqaa said students were more aware of their rights nowadays. They even went to clinics and acquired medical certificates documenting physical abuse before going to police stations and lodging complaints against teachers.

"The problem is that teachers are no longer able to control classes due to harsh punishments by the ministry and UNRWA of those who hit students. The end result is that many students end up without a proper education as chaos spreads in many classes," said the teacher, who admits he continues to resort to physical punishment.

A study by the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) on violence against children in Jordan said more than half of Jordanian children were physically abused or exposed to some form of aggressive behavior as a means of discipline.

The study, released in 2007, was based on interviews with parents and teachers, as well as police and courts dealing with such cases.

In early November, Jordan's Ministry of Education said it had set up a hotline for the public to report incidents of school violence, including attacks on teachers and on students as well.

Meanwhile, teenagers from across Jordan on 19 November urged officials to amend laws that impose lenient punishments for child abuse.

The call was made during Universal Children's Day, when children said an article in the Penal Code that gives parents the right to punish their children as a means of disciplining them must be amended.

According to Article 62 of the Penal Code, parents have the right to punish their children for disciplinary purposes in accordance with general norms.

"We want a student, when he wakes up, to be motivated to go to school, not to wake up saying it's another day of hell in school. Children have the right to learn and [live in a] safe environment, especially children of refugees," said Saqer. - **IRIN**