

Neirab Rehabilitation Project

by Lex Takkenberg and Hala Mukhles

Rehabilitation of the Neirab camp in northern Syria shows how improving the living conditions of Palestinian refugees need not invalidate their legal status, nor prejudice their right to return or receive compensation.

Between 1948 and 1950 World War II army barracks in the town of Neirab, 13 kilometres east of Aleppo, became home to refugees fleeing northern Palestine. For the past 56 years refugees have modified their shelters in the barracks as best they could, using metal sheets and stones to provide some privacy. With a population of 10,000 Neirab is the largest official camp in Syria, where the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) provides education, health, relief and social services. Residents are forced to live in increasingly over-crowded, unhealthy and unsafe housing. Poor construction of the barracks means scorching temperatures in summer and freezing conditions in winter.

Water seeps through leaks and holes in the roofs and the shelters become infested with rodents and insects.

Families of up to seven share spaces the size of a large walk-in cupboard, with no windows, little light or ventilation and mattresses stacked against the wall to quickly transform living and dining areas into a bedroom for the entire family. The cramped space and lack of privacy make for poor physical and psychosocial health. It is difficult for students to concentrate on their studies, with many doing homework on the floor in a tiny corner of the room. Poverty and the lack of privacy also raise tension among neighbours. The camp streets – often

too narrow to unfold even a small umbrella during rain – are the only place for children to play. The majority of the adult male refugees living in Neirab camp are casual labourers, while some work informally as street vendors. The average monthly income of US\$60 leaves families few resources beyond the most immediate needs, let alone for improved housing.

UNRWA has embarked on an initiative to achieve a sustainable improvement in the living conditions of refugees in Neirab which may serve as a model for future such projects elsewhere. A detailed feasibility study, funded by the Swiss government, concluded that a solution to the housing problem would necessitate reducing the overall population density in Neirab – currently 90 persons per 1,000 m². Housing conditions in the barracks area in Neirab camp could only be significantly improved by moving people up



– into multi-storey housing – or out of the camp, since there is no land in or adjacent to Neirab camp that is available for its expansion. UNRWA decided on doing both: building new housing units in Ein el Tal, some 20 kilometres from Neirab, and then two- and three-storey housing to replace the barracks in Neirab. Ein el Tal offers open space, fresh air and good health and education facilities. It has a land area almost three times the size of Neirab camp and a much smaller population.

Integrated urban development

UNRWA has approached the project as an integrated urban development plan, addressing the health, housing, education and socio-economic needs of the refugee community. Initiatives include the use of information and communication technology, sports facilities, a pilot community banking and housing loan scheme and the development of areas in both Neirab and Ein el Tal for stores and workshops. The Agency is also carrying out poverty and gender studies on the communities who stand to benefit from the project. The total cost of implementing the project is expected to be in the range of US\$28-30 million, a quarter of which is being provided via inputs from the Syrian government and from the refugee families. The Ein el Tal phase of the project is fully funded with contributions from Canada, Switzerland and the USA. UNRWA is now seeking up to \$13 million for the implementation of the second phase: the reconstruction of the approximately 1,000 remaining shelters in Neirab camp, together with related utility and social infrastructure.

The new dwellings are in light stone, with two, three or four rooms, depending on the family size. While UNRWA was in charge of constructing the houses, the refugees themselves carried out the finishing work with the help of UNRWA. The standard for the dwellings is based on UNRWA's long-standing norms for families in special hardship. The families moving to Ein el Tal are among the most disadvantaged of the 417,000 refugees registered with UNRWA in Syria. Many qualify for special hardship assistance, includ-

ing food rations, to provide for their most basic needs.

Ein el Tal does not at present have a sewage disposal network and, because of poor roads, most public transportation currently does not enter the camp. The new residential area will also need a piped water supply. UNRWA therefore engaged a local consultant to carry out a survey of needs and to undertake a detailed design for utility networks, roads and pathways. The development plan for Ein el Tal also includes landscaping of communal areas and the development, where necessary, of communal facilities, including expansion of the UNRWA-sponsored community centre to include a children's playground.

From the outset, UNRWA has actively engaged the residents of Neirab camp in planning and development. A detailed physical and socio-economic survey of the residents of Neirab camp in 2000 provided one of the first opportunities in decades to carry out a detailed house-to-house study of an entire refugee camp in Syria. Representative residents' committees from the two camps have been formed to further advise on the planning and implementation of the project.

The project has received extensive media interest from both the local and international press. The Swiss government commissioned and financed a promotional video, which is freely distributed to donors and the media upon request. The film, which profiles several families living inside the barracks area in Neirab, has been instrumental in raising donor and media interest in the project.

Mohammed Abu Hmeid, 37, was born and raised in Neirab and spent his childhood in a two-room shelter with a dozen family members. As a young man he took a job as a concrete worker and made enough money to buy the embroidery machine he and his wife now use for their small business. Mohammed and his wife were among the first 28 families to move to Ein el Tal. "Living in Neirab

was very difficult. There is no privacy." The couple want something better for their six-year-old daughter. "I want her to study and I want her to have a sibling", he said, noting that their old shelter was too small for the expansion of their family. Mohammed is now looking forward to embarking on a new chapter in his life. "Every new beginning has its difficulties," said Mohammed. "But at least in Ein el Tal, if you open the door you will see the sky."

The Syrian government and the authorities of the Aleppo governorate have played an important role in providing infrastructure in Ein el Tal and land valued at US\$ 3.3 million. Aleppo has extended the main municipal sewerage network to the camp entrance, asphalted main roads leading to the camp and extended water, electricity and street-lighting to the area of the new housing. In Neirab camp the Aleppo governorate has implemented upgrading of the electricity, telephone, water and road networks.

The Syrian government has fully supported the Neirab Rehabilitation Project without jeopardising the right of the refugees to return to Palestine or receive compensation for losses, as provided for in UN General Assembly resolution 194. The government of Lebanon, which has taken a restrictive attitude towards plans to improve the equally atrocious camp living conditions faced by Palestine refugees, should take note.

Lex Takkenberg is the Director of UNRWA Affairs, Syria, and Hala Mukhles is UNRWA's Public Information Officer in Syria. Emails: ltakkenberg@unrwa.org; h.mukhles@unrwa.org

For further information about the project, see: www.un.org/unrwa/programmes/projects/nairab-eng.pdf