



Brigitte Auger

UNHCR community centre in Saida Zeinab.

Clowns in Damascus

Sybella Wilkes

UNHCR first learned about the positive benefits of clowns when a local troupe was hired for World Refugee Day 2007 to perform in the tense and unhappy waiting room at the main refugee registration centre in Damascus. UNHCR staff noticed that the children were more relaxed during the registration appointment.

UNHCR asked the independent international group, Clowns Without Borders,¹ to review the first show, which focused on informing parents and children that all Iraqi children have the right to attend school. Clowns Without Borders then returned in November to offer further training to the clowns. Their leader,

Christina Aguirre, spent time getting to know Iraqi children in order to help design the shows. "When you see a child in the street here, all you see are a lot of problems and no happiness," said Aguirre. "But when we put on our red noses and play with them, they forget their problems for a little while."

At a community centre in Seida Zeinab, one of the main Iraqi refugee areas in Damascus, a crowd of children burst out laughing as two clowns squirted each other with water and made flowers out of balloons. "It was beautiful," said

Rodeen, a young Iraqi girl with a beaming smile on her face.

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Refugee registration in Syria

UNHCR has registered close to 250,000 Iraqi refugees throughout the region, including 165,000 in Syria out of an estimated Iraqi population there of between 1.2 and 1.4 million people. The number of applicants in Syria continues to increase and, in order to expand outreach, UNHCR has established mobile registration and assistance teams.

The waiting period for non-urgent registration interviews in Syria has been cut to two months, while applicants with specific needs – requiring early registration – are fast-tracked. But while the waiting period for registration of new asylum seekers has been significantly reduced, concern is growing in Syria over the re-registration of Iraqis. The approaching expiry date of vast numbers of certificates issued during the massive influx which began in March 2007, and the backlog which will result from it, will put considerable pressure on interview capacities in the coming months.

There has been a notable rise in the number of applications by people recently arrived in Syria. Many of them, however, are not arriving for the first time but are back after a tentative return to Iraq – where they found the situation less safe than expected.



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UNHCR registration centre in Douma.

When UNHCR put out a message that it was looking for clowns to perform a regular show at the registration centre, as luck would have it, three Iraqi actors who had worked in a clown troop in Iraq came forward.

1. www.clownswithoutborders.org