

European aid to vulnerable Palestinians



by Daniela Cavini

Funds from the European Commission's Humanitarian Department (ECHO) alleviate the suffering of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and support projects for the three million refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria whose humanitarian needs are often neglected by the international community.

The European Commission is one of the largest contributors of humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people. Since the second *intifada* began in 2000, the EC's Humanitarian Aid Department has provided over €191 million to meet the critical needs of Palestinians in the OPT and in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria.

ECHO funds are used to:

- increase access to health services in isolated areas of the OPT
- provide food aid to groups particularly affected by movement restrictions
- rehabilitate shelters for Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon
- support small-scale economic activities and employment opportunities
- provide psychosocial support for children
- update, rehabilitate and expand water networks and enable safe disposal of domestic wastewater
- support efforts by the UN and the Red Cross to protect the civilian population from the effects of the conflict and guarantee their access to essential needs, in conformity with the principles of International Humanitarian Law.

Shelter repair for refugee family

"This is the first time I have owned something in my life. These two

rooms are tiny, but habitable, and above all, ours," says Zaika Said (48), the daughter of Palestinian refugees and mother of three. After a life on the move, Zaika and her family have ended up in Homs, 160 kilometres north of Damascus. Since it was established in 1949 the population of their camp has risen substantially. Shelters have been built on every available space, leading to severe deterioration in the standard of living. The roads are full of potholes, buildings lack natural light and ventilation, the schools are old and dilapidated and the sewerage system badly needs upgrading. Unemployment and poverty levels are high.

Zaika's story is similar to so many: "My parents left Palestine in 1948 and ended up in the Neirab refugee camp, near Aleppo, in northern Syria. That is where I was born." In search of better living conditions, her family moved to Homs, then to Damascus where she met her husband. "Living in the big city became impossible. It was too expensive so, five years ago, we decided to come back. We wanted a better and cheaper place to live." However, on their return to Homs, the family was struck by new tragedy. In 2005 Zaika's disabled husband died. Despite being confined to a wheelchair he had been a weaver, earning a meagre living to support Zaika and their three children. All of

a sudden, even this small income was gone. "Of all the difficult times I've gone through, the worst was when my husband died," Zaika continues. "I really thought I wouldn't make it."

A year has passed since she lost her husband and Zaika's worst fears have gradually given way to hope. "People helped me in a way I wasn't expecting. My children are fatherless, and in our tradition, society doesn't let such children down. I received help from many, many people." Zaika's case was classified as a 'social hardship' one. As her house was in dire need of repair she was able to join the regional



emergency shelter rehabilitation programme, financed to the tune of €2.75 million by the European Commission and implemented by UNRWA. In a few months, thanks to the cooperation of Syrian local authorities, her home was repaired, along with 334 other dwellings in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. Around 1,700 people benefited directly from the programme. In Homs, 20 shelters were rebuilt using a 'self help' approach. Beneficiaries themselves had to complete the work. In liaison

The winners of a drawing competition organised in Homs refugee camp, Syria, to celebrate the completion of the shelter rehabilitation programme financed by the European Commission.

with UNRWA staff they purchased materials, hired workers and supervised them. This involvement is considered very important, because it empowers beneficiaries by giving them a sense of ownership.

This is what happened to Zaika. "Now that our shelter is safe and habitable, I really feel we can make it. Somehow, I have come to terms with the fact that I'm alone, and that I must keep going. My children have grown up quickly in the past few months. They are wonderful and study hard so they will be able to make a living in the future. What do I hope for? I want them to have an education, for God to help them in their lives, and for me to be close to them always."

When asked about the land of her forefathers, Zaika is silent for a few seconds. Then she whispers: "I have never seen Palestine. I have been bouncing from one place to the next for my entire life. I cannot give up the dream to return. I watch the news all the time, what happens there. I tell myself maybe my children will be able to go back to their land. But I also feel that this is our home. Most people in the world have just one home. We have two, a real one, and an ideal one."

Responding to the water crisis

Over a third of the population of the OPT have no access to piped water. The Palestinian Water Authority estimates average per capita consumption in rural areas to be a mere 15 litres – by comparison, the average US citizen uses 600 litres. Access to piped water is affected by frequent restrictions of supply to the major water networks, deliberate and collateral damage to

water infrastructure, contamination of water catchments and physical constraints (closure, curfew). As a result, there is an increased dependence on tankered water. In some rural areas prices rise in the



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dry summer months and up to 40% of household income may be spent on water for household uses. Scarcity of water for irrigation prevents proper exploitation and cultivation of agricultural land. Increasing access to water remains, therefore, a priority for the European Commission's Humanitarian Department. Since 2002, some 22 water and sanitation projects in the OPT have been funded at a cost of €15.7 million. Some 850,000 people have benefited from interventions – which have ranged from basic repairs to water infrastructure such as pipes, provision of rain water collection from roof tops and storage in underground cisterns and exploitation of alternative water resources such as springs, which are protected from external contamination.

The European Commission is concerned about the deteriorating situation in the West Bank and Gaza where 40% of the population depend on humanitarian aid. The deteriorating living conditions are a direct consequence of the conflict and its spiral of violence. The separation Wall has affected hundreds of thousands of people, cutting off

entire villages from access to water, livelihoods, farm lands, businesses and essential services like healthcare and education. A policy of closures and movement restrictions further limits reliable access to vital goods

and services and hampers the work of humanitarian actors. The considerable decline in the quality of essential services such as health and education and the economic and/or physical inability of most Palestinians to access them have combined to depress household incomes, exhaust assets and coping mechanisms, and erode basic living conditions. Between 1.7 and 2.2 million people

(47 to 60% of Palestinians) now live below the poverty line on less than \$2 (€1.54) per day. More than 600,000 people (16% of the population) cannot afford to meet their basic needs in food, shelter and clothing

European solidarity will continue to be expressed in practical assistance. Europe's commitment was underlined in November 2005 by the Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, Louis Michel, when he told refugees in Khan Yunis, Gaza: "Be sure that Europe does not forget you; we will never let you down. The agreement I just signed [providing €14 million to UNRWA's food aid programme] is a clear sign that we are and will be supporting Palestinian refugees. The EU has no other agenda than to help build sustainable peace and prosperity."

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Ceremony to celebrate completion of the shelter rehabilitation programme financed by the European Commission, Homs refugee camp, Syria.