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PALESTINIAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE BUREAU VISITS CAMPS FOR PALESTINE REFUGEES IN JORDAN

AMMAN, 21 February -- "This morning, we saw the real face of Palestine outside of Palestine," the Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People told the community leaders at the Irbid camp for Palestine refugees in northern Jordan today, capping the conclusion yesterday of the United Nations Seminar on Assistance to the Palestinian People, in Amman.

Joining Paul Badji of Senegal in a first ever official tour of Palestinian refugee camps by a Committee delegation were the other members of the Bureau: Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz (Cuba) and Zahir Tanin (Afghanistan), Vice-Chairmen, and Saviour F. Borg (Malta), Rapporteur. The Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations, Riyad Mansour, joined the ambassadors, along with the Chief of the United Nations Division for Palestinian Rights, Yuri Gourov, and the Committee Secretary, Wolfgang Grieger.

Ambassador Badji told the group of some 30 Palestinian community leaders, eager to know what the United Nations could do to help and frustrated at what they perceived was the lack of concrete intervention thus far, that the Committee had known their living situation was unacceptable and that, not only Arab countries had to work to solve the problem, but the entire international community had to help the Palestinians live in dignity and peace, in an independent and sovereign State.

What he had seen this morning had convinced him that — "give Palestinians a State, a nation, and they will surprise the world" -- because all the Palestinians he had seen, young and old, were taking care of themselves. What was missing was a State. "And this Committee is working every day to make that happen. We understand your frustration, but we also know your faith," he said.

The two refugee camps visited today — the Irbid and Husn camps -- are both in the area of operations of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The Agency's Field Director for Jordan, Sheldon Pitterman, led the tours, with the aid of additional UNRWA staff. Many of them were Palestinians, who, themselves, had grown up in these camps.

Ten of the fifty-nine Palestine refugee camps in UNRWA's total area of operations are located in Jordan, which has approximately 500,000 refugees. Four of those camps were set up after 1948 on the east bank of the Jordan River, and six after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, which had been under Jordanian administration at that time.

The Husn camp, known locally as Martyr Azmi el-Mufti camp, was one of the six emergency camps established in 1968 for 12,500 Palestine refugees and displaced persons who had left the West Bank and Gaza Strip as a result of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The camp is situated 80 kilometres north of Amman. The refugees, initially accommodated in tents in an area of 774,000 square metres, have grown to some 25,000.

To enable the refugees to withstand the harsh winters, the Agency dropped its earlier plans to provide them with stronger tents in favour of prefabricated shelters. As it does at its other camps, UNRWA provides education, health, relief, and social services at Husn, where it operates nine installations with 167 staff. The delegates visited a women's programme centre, an income-generation project and a refugee family there.

Irbid camp was one of the four established after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Set up in 1951 for 4,000 refugees in an area of 244,000 square metres, the camp's inhabitants has grown to 24,833 registered refugees. Over the years, the refugees replaced the tents and mud shelters with concrete dwellings. UNRWA's provision of education, health, relief and social services at Irbid is also through nine installations, operated by 185 staff. There, the ambassadors visited a rehabilitation centre, a girls' preparatory school, a health clinic and a camp improvement committee.

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