

# Refugees return to camp

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BIBNEEN, Lebanon — Palestinian refugees are beginning to return to the Nahr el Bared refugee camp, 10 months after it was reduced to rubble in a battle between the Lebanese army and Muslim terrorists holed up inside.

“We want to go back now,” said Nael Abu Siam, 40, a Palestinian displaced by the conflict. “We have everything there — memories of births, our friends, our houses, even our kids’ toys.”

Mr. Siam now lives in a school room in a nearby camp and awaits a call to move back to Nahr el Bared.

A three-month battle between the Lebanese army and the al Qaeda-linked group Fatah al Islam broke out at this camp, in northern Lebanon, in May.

Since then, many of the camp’s 30,000 Palestinian residents have lived in tents and school rooms during what has been Lebanon’s coldest winter in 25 years.

The return is not celebrated by everyone. Surrounding the camp are Lebanese villages where many are angry with the Palestinians for bringing conflict and death to their doorsteps.

While the militants who took over the camp and sparked the conflict were mostly foreigners, many locals blame the Palestinians for giving them safe harbor.

“They are the cause of all the bad things,” said Hanin Rafae, a mother of

eleven, who lives in Bibneen, on the hill overlooking the ruined camp.

These days she struggles to keep her family warm as they await spring. Since there is no fireplace, they huddle every evening around a fire on their patio overlooking the Mediterranean Sea.

For most of the past 60 years, Lebanon has restricted Palestinian refugees from working at most jobs and owning property. This has mirrored a general distrust regarding the nation's unwelcome "visitors."

But here in the North, before the conflict, it was one of the few areas of Lebanon where there was an integration between the Lebanese and the country's Palestinian refugees, who constitute approximately 10 percent of the population.

And the primary social glue was trade.

"The Palestinians of the Nahr al Bared camp sought out the consumer," said Ismael Khassan, an architect living in Beirut. "In the 40s and 50s, they went on donkeys up into the hills and neighboring villages and showed merchandise to the locals.

"They sold door to door. They established a social link with the Lebanese, which encouraged them to come down to the camp and trade."

Over time, Nahr el Bared and its market became a key economic hub in north Lebanon.

Because Palestinians can easily avoid paying sales tax, they offered cheaper products than Lebanese shopkeepers.

Camp merchants also tapped into the sizable Palestinian diaspora in neighboring Arab states, using it as a de facto trading network.

Many goods sold at Nahr el Bared were smuggled across the nearby porous Syrian border, eliminating import duties, residents say.

As a result, locals like Mrs. Rafae could walk down the hill to the camp and buy a loaf of bread for 60 cents, half the price of that at a Lebanese store.

Five kilos of cooking oil (about 11 pounds) cost \$4.50 instead of \$7, and a \$6 carton of cigarettes was \$4 in the camp.

But once the fighting began, the discounts and good-neighbor policy ended.

“The Lebanese had a good relationship with the Palestinians,” said Nadim Talawi, mayor of Mohamra, a town adjacent to the camp. “But some villages beside the camp lost soldiers and civilians, and this has generated hatred and tension.”

“Many Lebanese were killed, so we won’t buy there,” said Mrs. Rafea. “I prefer to buy from the Lebanese now — not from Palestinians.”

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