



PHOTO: UNRWA

## **Nahr El Bared reconstruction underway**

Hope on the horizon for Palestinian refugees

October 29, 2008, saw the official launch of rubble removal operations at the destroyed Nahr El Bared Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon. The work signalled the start of a massive rebuilding program that will allow some 30,000 displaced Palestinians to return home. OFID, which was among the first to respond to the appeal for funding, is contributing US\$5 million to the reconstruction effort.

Established in December 1949 by the League of Red Cross Societies, Nahr El Bared has been home to three generations of Palestinians. The intervening decades have seen the camp mushroom in size, spilling across its boundaries to accommodate an ever-growing population; its people intermarrying and building strong social and economic ties with the local Lebanese. For most of its residents, Nahr El Bared has offered a life of relative “normality”, despite the restrictions imposed upon them.

This all changed in the summer of 2007, when the camp became the center of fighting between the Lebanese army and Islamist militants. In the bombing that accompanied the conflict, Nahr El Bared was all but razed to the ground, and its 30,000 inhabitants had no choice but to flee and seek shelter in one of the other 11 official Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.

The destruction of Nahr El Bared was a devastating blow, not just to the refugees but also to the local economy. Situated close to the Syrian border, the camp had grown to be a local commercial hub and was home to the largest market in northern Lebanon.

### Returning home

For the thousands of families who have been living in makeshift accommodation for the past 18 months, the return to Nahr El Bared cannot come soon enough. UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) is slowly rolling out temporary housing units adjacent to the ruined camp, but the vast majority of refugees remain crammed into community centers and schools in nearby Beddawi, another – already overcrowded – camp. A permanent return to their former community is longed for by all. The reconstruction process, however, is expected to be a lengthy one.



PHOTO: UNRWA

Nahr El Bared has been home to three generations of Palestinians.

On June 23 this year, a special donor conference, hosted by the Government of Austria in cooperation with the Government of Lebanon, the European Commission and the League of Arab States, was held in Vienna. The purpose of the conference was to raise funds for a comprehensive reconstruction plan prepared jointly by UNRWA, the World Bank and the Government of Lebanon. It succeeded in raising US\$122 million of the US\$445 million required for the rebuilding and recovery of Nahr El Bared and its environs. For its part, OFID pledged US\$5 million to cover the cost of building eight new schools and a vocational training center. Announcing the donation, OFID Director-General, Mr. Suleiman J. Al-Herbish, said that it reflected OFID’s “ongoing support to Palestine and the Palestinian people.”

OFID’s pledge was made good in October, when the official grant agreement was signed at OFID HQ by Mr. Al-Herbish and UNRWA Commissioner-General, Ms. Karen AbuZayd. Also present at the ceremony were HE Dr. Ralph Scheide, Ambassador and Deputy Director-General for Political Affairs (Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs); HE Makram Queisi, Ambassador of Jordan and Dean of the Arab Diplomatic Corps; HE Dr. Mikhail Wehbe, Ambassador of the League of Arab States; HE Ishaya El Khoury, Ambassador of Lebanon; and HE Dr. Zuheir

Elwazer, Ambassador of Palestine; as well as HE Mr. Jamal Nasser Lootah, OFID Governing Board Chairman.

Speaking at the event, Mr. Al-Herbish said that OFID was pleased “to be part of the global coalition making a contribution to the Palestinian struggle for a better future.”

Expressing UNRWA’s gratitude to OFID for its donation, Ms. AbuZayd noted that the institution had been among the first to respond to the appeal for reconstruction funds. “I appreciate deeply the support that OFID has extended to UNRWA over the past few years,” she said, adding that such support was needed “more than ever in today’s grim circumstances for Palestinian refugees.”

### The long road ahead

The Nahr El Bared reconstruction program is the largest in UNRWA’s 60-year history. Clearing the site so that the rebuilding can commence is expected to take until January 2009, and it will be some time before work is sufficiently advanced for refugees to start moving back. The whole process could last between three and four years. In the meantime, UNRWA continues to provide shelter for 16,000 refugees and emergency food rations for 27,000, as well as other essential services such as medical care, water supply and sewage disposal. ■