

PALESTINIAN REFUGEES REPAY THE FAVOR TO THEIR LONGTIME HOSTS

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RASHIDIEH CAMP, LEBANON — The woman lifted the lid off one of two enormous bubbling pots, releasing the aroma of a hearty stew that would feed nearly 1,000 displaced Lebanese who have sought refuge in this Palestinian refugee camp in southern Lebanon.

"We have been guests in their country for more than 50 years, and they have been here for only a few weeks," said Alia Zamzam, a Palestinian refugee who heads a women's committee responsible for feeding the Rashidieh camp's newest inhabitants. "This is the way to treat a guest."

Lebanon's Palestinian refugees and their descendants, displaced by Arab-Israeli wars in 1948 and 1967, are now caring for another people displaced by war.

According to the Beirut government, more than 900,000 people have fled the Israeli-Hezbollah fighting in southern Lebanon that began July 12 when Hezbollah raiders crossed into Israel, captured two soldiers and killed eight others. Israeli soldiers and Hezbollah guerrillas have been engaged in fierce ground combat since then, with Israel bombing roads, bridges and other targets throughout southern Lebanon and Hezbollah firing waves of rockets into northern Israel.

A little closer to home

Most of the Lebanese refugees drove or walked north as far as they could. But some have opted to stay a little closer to home in places like Rashidieh — located on the outskirts of the southern Lebanese city of Tyre and about seven miles from Israel's northern border —

rather than risk a perilous journey along ripped-up roads prone to daily Israeli bombardment.

"I didn't dare go farther, I was scared of the road," said 40-year-old Hanaa Mughniyeh, who, along with her son Mohammad, 9, arrived at the camp a few days ago from the nearby village of Deir Qanoun.

"He's turning gray because of the fear," she said as she ruffled her son's hair. "When he hears a shell falling he runs up to me and hugs me."

The Mughniyehs, like most of the Lebanese in the camp, are staying in a school run by a United Nations aid agency. There are two or three families in each of the school's 35 classrooms. Children's clothes are strung up outside to dry. Old men sit on wooden desks that have been moved into the playground.

Rashidieh's Palestinian population of about 17,000 has found itself in the odd position of caring for these families. The camp is run by a community group called the Popular Committee that is loosely allied with the Palestinian Authority, the entity that governs the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The committee provides the new refugees three meals a day, mattresses and medicines, but the Palestinians say supplies are running low.

Nongovernmental aid agencies report they have been unable to get anything but a trickle of relief supplies into Rashidieh and the two other Palestinian camps in the Tyre area since the fighting began.

"We have a shortage of mattresses and sheets but we are providing them from our own homes," Zamzam, 55, said as she walked around a kitchen set up in one of the classrooms.

The Popular Committee, among other things, deals with humanitarian aid groups, including the U.N. Relief and Works Agency, or UNRWA, which is responsible for running Lebanon's 12 Palestinian camps.

"We don't have many funds in our hands," said Abu Mustafa, 55, a committee member and school teacher. "We're getting donations from richer Palestinians and from Palestinian and Lebanese aid groups."

By the standards of Lebanon's refugee camps, islands of squalor and poverty that house most of the country's 390,000 refugees, Rashidieh isn't too bad.

Located on the seashore, the camp's multistory cinder-block houses lining its narrow alleyways are clustered amid vegetable gardens and plots filled with fig trees, grape vines and banana groves.

Prices for food, however, have jumped since the fighting began, and gasoline and other fuels have run out. But the electricity is still on, most stores remain open and water is abundant, thanks to the camp's proximity to the Ras al-Ain spring. Most important, Rashidieh is still a relative haven, as far as safety goes in southern Lebanon.

Camp on war footing

Nonetheless, the camp is on a war footing. Fatah militiamen garbed in fatigues and carrying sidearms are seen throughout, many of them veterans of Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Then, Rashidieh and the other two camps ringing Tyre kept the Israelis at bay for several days in intense fighting before the Israelis eventually pushed past them and continued up to Beirut.

"It was a tough battle. We were kids but we fought them hard," one of the militiamen, Abu Chawqi, 44, said as he sat under a tree, Kalashnikov rifle at his side.

He predicted the Israelis would come again to the camp's gates and said, "We are ablaze with eagerness to fight them."

Back in the school playground, Hanaa Mughniyeh hoped it would not come to that. "If the situation calms down," she said, "I want to go back home."