

The National Institution of Social Care
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From Kassem Aina, **General Director National Institution of Social Care & Vocational Training**
Beit Atfal As-Sumoud

I am pleased to share with you my speech for the conference titled "Justice for Gaza: Gaza's Orphan Crisis, How Will the World Address this Vexing Problem". The conference, co-organized by the Gaza Health Initiative (GHI) and the American University of Beirut (AUB), took place at AUB in Beirut, Lebanon, on June 20-21, 2024.

Thank you for your solidarity.

Beirut, June 21, 2024

Gaza's Orphan Crisis: How will the world address this vexing problem*

Allow me first to express thanks and appreciation to the institutions that took the initiative to organize this important conference. In particular, I'd like to extend sincere thanks to Dr. Fadlo Khuri, Dr. Fawzi Al-Hammouri, and Dr. Omar Lattouf, and many thanks to the coordinating and organizing team for the follow up and communication to make this conference happen.

I'm honored today to address you with the delicate subject that forms the core of our humanitarian and national mission, and present to you our vision regarding the problem of the orphans in Gaza.

To begin with, I kindly ask you to pardon me for replacing the term "**orphans**" by the expression "**children of martyrs**". Because these fathers gave their lives to liberate Gaza from the oppression of the Occupation, it is our duty to honor their legacy and to discuss ways to provide proper care to their children and families. Thank you.

Based on the experience of Beit Atfal Assumoud in sponsoring the children of Tal el Zatar martyrs in August 1976, and the children of Sabra-Shatila massacre martyrs in September 1982,

and continuing to care and serve orphans and others like them of the children in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon,

Arising from our sense of humanity and nationalism, what we conduct is a march of loyalty to the martyrs. It began with embracing the children of the martyrs of the two massacres since 1976, two massacres committed by the militias of extremist right-wing Christian parties collaborating with the Zionist enemy. Since then, our institution has continued to serve its people until today.

Founding Beit Atfal Assumoud institution represented a civilized, humanitarian and national response to the horrifying massacres against Palestinians, Lebanese, and other Arab civilians who lived in Tal el Zaatar camp, the camp of the poor and laborers. Nearly 5,000 of the camp residents were martyred on that site. Among those martyrs were families who lost both, the father and the mother. Beit Atfal Assumoud, Home of the Children of Steadfastness, embraced the children who lost both parents, indiscriminately of nationality or religion. The Beit took 180 children of various age groups and from many families, ensuring that members of the same family remain together, or by forming a new family in an alternative home.

The Beit adopted a policy of family care and surrogate mothers. A number of women were selected, Palestinians and Lebanese who had lived through the state of siege, war, and massacres. They underwent special training to qualify them to carry out the task of the surrogate mother who would care for the children of her family, consisting of eight to ten children. Additionally, a team of men was also selected for the roles of teachers, art instructors, cooks, drivers, and similar roles. The major objective being to create the image of the Father to be present at home.

It is worth mentioning that UNICEF in Beirut found this method of care unique, ranking it as the "Third Experience of social care to the orphaned children." Back then, UNICEF had planned to organize and hold a special conference for orphans' care in June 1982. Unfortunately, the Israeli Invasion of Lebanon came first taking place on the 5th of June of that year. The conference was canceled as a result of the occurring event.

Why has it been marked as the "Third Experience"? Because it combined the styles of the commonly known orphanages, and that of the Children's Villages (SOS). The method that Beit Atfal Assumoud used was distinguished by providing what is suitable and proper for the care and upbringing of children, taking from both previous methods their good practices, and at the same time, gathering the members of a single family and preserving its familial independence, whereby the family lives in an apartment in the institution's building.

The kitchen and dining hall were common to all the apartment residents of the big house. The same meals were served to all children according to a schedule and unified timing known to all the children. The educational support lessons, along with the cultural, art, and sports activities were open to them all.

To avoid isolation of the people of Beit Atfal Assumoud, a nursery was established for the children under three years of age and the workers' own children. It also received a number of children from the institution's neighbors in al-Beit nursery. For children over the age of six, the primary and middle school age, they were sent to UNRWA schools in Shatila and Burj el Barajneh camps. Those in the secondary level were enrolled in private Lebanese schools in Beirut, as was the case of all Palestinian students at that time.

At al-Beit, there were not uniformed outfits for all the children alike. Each child chooses to buy his/her own clothes with his/her surrogate mother. Every child took a daily allowance from his/her mother with a value appropriate to age. The children had the right to receive their friends and relatives on Fridays and Sundays.

Beit Atfal Assumoud resembled the community in Palestine before 1948. The children at al-Beit were Palestinians, Lebanese, Syrians, and Kurds. They were Muslims and Christians. The common trait that put them together was that they are all children of Tel el-Zaatar Massacre martyrs. They have all lost their parents.

On 16 September 1982, the world woke up on the news of Sabra and Shatila Massacre; a massacre that took the lives of more than 4,000 Palestinians, Lebanese and other Arabs. Once again, Beit Atfal Assumoud was faced by a new humanitarian and national mission in response to that hideous horrifying massacre committed by the Israeli aggressive elements against our camps in south Lebanon and in Beirut.

With the increasing number of martyrs' children as a result of the continuous war crimes and massacres against the Palestinians, the organization's board decided to launch the project of care to the child within the family. It was called the Family Happiness Project which has been based on keeping the child within his/her family, in his/her camp, among his/her relatives and neighbors. This policy was applied to maintain the family unity and to avoid the problem of discrimination between the siblings in the case of sending some of the children to orphanages.

As such, community centers were established in all the camps. The first was established in Shatila camp in 1984, to provide care for the children of the martyrs. Since then, the institution has been sponsoring nearly 1,000 orphans yearly. The criteria included: (a) orphans, (b) children of a family with extreme hardship conditions where the father suffers from severe chronic illness or disability that prevents securing a job, and (c) poor families with no regular income.

The child and family care program took the path of finding sponsors, individuals or institutions, to help the family financially and morally. This sponsoring method has been needed since the institution is an independent national organization that does not have ties to any political or religious organization, faction or party. In extending its services and implementing its programs, the institution relies on donors of the non-governmental organizations and committees of solidarity with the Palestinian people's just cause.

For the sake of executing the child-and-family sponsorship program, a number of female social workers are employed. These workers are from, and live in, the camps. Each one worker is responsible for following up with 30 families of the hardship cases, who lost its breadwinner and has no regular financial income, and the family's children are sponsored by the kind and generous from different countries.

Each center provides the needed services of education, physical and mental health, cultural activities as well as arts. These services are accessible to the sponsored children and other children in the camp. Mothers/caregivers and their children are provided with guidance and counseling sessions; they also receive trainings in preserving their heritage and committing to their identity through engaging in Dabkeh (the folklore national dance) teams and popular songs and celebrating national occasions. And so, the institution's tasks have grown and developed, from providing care to children's martyrs who lost both parents, to sponsoring the martyrs' children living without the father, and other orphans in the camps.

According to the institution's experience throughout 48 years of humanitarian and development work, we strongly believe that the children of Gaza, children of martyrs, highly deserve recognition, honoring, and proper care.

Gaza children who have lost both parents, or one of them, are not orphans. They are the children of Palestine martyrs. We bare moral, humanitarian, and national responsibilities towards them. We are bound to work for them, and work hard, to provide a dignified life for them. We are bound to work towards building up a future for them that is worth of the sacrifices those martyrs have presented. We have a moral obligation to ensure a future for these martyrs' children that comprises of love, kindness, tenderness, hope, stability, dignity, and peace in their home country.

Today we find ourselves facing huge challenges to provide care and support to more than 19,000 children who were subject to unthinkable and beyond the human perception's forms of violence. Of these forms are the tragic loss of the dearest persons, the loss of both parents or one of them, the loss of siblings and relatives, friends and neighbors, and in the harshest circumstances. Watching those atrocities of killing and destruction, experiencing the savagery of the Israeli occupying military, causes in the least deep psychological traumas. This is an urgent matter of concern that requires finding suitable solutions to support them and take concerted actions.

This hideous war launched by the Occupier's military machine against the people of Gaza Strip, still ongoing uninterrupted for nine months now, is the least described as ethnic cleansing and a genocide. The aggression proved no commitment to UN Resolutions, International Laws, Child's Rights, or to Human Rights. It is a war meant to kill the human beings and dilapidate the nature, destroying the stone and the tree.

Amongst the 19,000+ children of martyrs, there are nearly 400 of these who have lost both parents. The situation imposes categorization of cases. For all the children of Gaza's martyrs of various categories, and in response to the urgent need to tackle this problem, we propose the following:

- A. **Children of martyrs lost both parents:** Establish special houses similar to Beit Atfal Assumoud in Lebanon.

- B. **Children of martyrs lost the father:** We assert the importance of adopting the "child care within the family" policy in order to preserve the family unity. For this sake, establish centers that provide the various needs of the family and its children, and other children in the displacement camps. Those centers should be established inside the camps.

- C. **Children of martyrs lost the mother:** We propose to create a special fund to help the fathers find wives who will support in providing care to the children. The men have lost their houses and all their assets in this war. They lost their jobs and incomes that supported their living. Lacking the materialistic support will only form additional burdens and problems. Establishing this special fund will help them provide stability to their children. Simultaneously, the new wives will need support to deal with children emotionally affected by the loss of their mother. This can happen through structured programs of training and guidance to the new wife. In turn, the children themselves need guidance to show acceptance of a new mother at home.

Lastly, we do not pretend to have clear knowledge of the impact of this genocidal war on the people of Gaza, especially on the children. The unprecedented forms of torture and destruction which the humankind has never witnessed before in this modern age, are not found in medicine and science books in the international libraries, especially on its impact on the mental and social health of the children, in both short and long terms. But within the available limit of knowledge we have, it is for sure and foremost, that those children need to regain a sense of safety, security, and stability. They need a community, home, school, toys, friends, and adults to lean on upon need.

Needless to mention, they need specialized mental health of multiple elements and aspects. Children are apt to change their thoughts and the way they perceive life, influenced by traumas that affect the physiological development of the children. Some of them need specialized care to reshape their behavior and rearrange their capabilities to live.

More specifically, the children are impacted by the adults who provide them with care. Those adults themselves also need support and assistance to be able to take care of the children. For some, general guidance might be sufficient; others may require regular long-term psychological

counseling. In addition, providers of care, the workers themselves, will need follow-up and assistance to save them the burnout and compassion fatigue they might get on the long run.

In short, this mass destruction on the psychological and mental levels --related to the huge losses of property, the beloved, safety and security-- needs a comprehensive rehabilitation operation on both aspects of physical and psychological levels.

Finally, we look towards the official Palestinian institutions, especially the Foundation for the Care of the Families of Martyrs and Prisoners of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the United Nations bodies, and international organizations, to provide sufficient fund to establish care houses and support the service centers in their proposed programs to provide care for the children in order to ensure receiving love and kindness, and the proper care they deserve, honoring the martyrs' sacrifices and preserving the dignity of their families.

Let's salute the people of Palestine in Gaza; Salute to the bravery and sacrifices they are offering; Salute to the people of Gaza for the steadfastness and patience they are revealing; Salute to their persistence not to leave Gaza.

Wishing fast recovery to the injured, the freedom to the prisoners, peace and safety to the children and families, and Justice and Peace to Palestine. Our Palestine from the River to the Sea