

U.N. Dispute Brings West Bank Differences to the Fore

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By Isabel Kershner

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JALAZOUN REFUGEE CAMP, West Bank — The children roaming the alleys of this Palestinian refugee camp north of Ramallah have been out of school for seven weeks. Food distribution is at a standstill, as are the camp's regular health services. This crowded, concrete warren of roughly 15,000 residents is seething with anger.

Throughout the West Bank, 4,500 employees of the [United Nations Relief and Works Agency](#), the group that has provided assistance to the Palestinian refugees for more than six decades, have been on strike over pay and other issues since early December.

The growing crisis has underscored internal Palestinian differences. In Jalazoun, residents say they support the striking workers but are furious with both the administration of the United Nations agency and with the Palestinian Authority government. The tensions led to clashes this month after residents twice blocked the main road leading to the camp with burning tires to protest the lack of services and attention. The Palestinian Authority sent in police officers in riot gear who shot into the air, fired tear gas and used batons to quell the protests, according to witnesses.

The police said dozens of officers were hurt when the demonstrators hurled stones at them.

“They sent in special forces,” said Mahmoud Mubarak, who runs Jalazoun's Popular Committee, the camp's elected leadership, and says he is on the payroll of the Palestinian Authority's General Intelligence Service. “They should have sent the health minister or the education minister,” he added.

The Palestinian Authority generally governs the civil affairs of the

Palestinian population of the West Bank, which numbers more than 2.5 million. But of those, 740,000 are refugees registered by the United Nations, including those who fled or were expelled to the West Bank in 1948 during the war over Israel's foundation, and their descendants. The refugees — whether they have remained in the camps or moved to the cities, like most in the West Bank — are entitled to social services and assistance provided by the United Nations agency.

The refugees do not want to rely on the Palestinian Authority; they see that as tantamount to giving up their special refugee status and with it their demand for the right to return to their former homes in what is now Israel, a demand that Israel vehemently rejects. But they say that in the absence of the United Nations services, the Palestinian Authority should be an advocate for them and take some responsibility for their welfare.

Citing a steady scaling back of United Nations budgets and services over the years, the refugees say they fear the world is losing interest in their cause. They warn that no Palestinian leader will be able to concede their rights at a time when Secretary of State John Kerry is pushing for an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement that will inevitably require compromise.

Mr. Mubarak, 50, was born in Jalazoun. His family came from Beit Nabala, a village near Lod whose lands, he said, now lie partly within Israel's international airport.

"The refugees in Palestine are just guests," Mr. Mubarak said. "The Palestinian Authority is hosting us."

On a recent weekday in Jalazoun, a group of young boys dragged and prodded a scrawny donkey along a path after a morning on the hillside collecting paltry scraps of metal in an old food sack from the United Nations agency.

Elsewhere in the camp, Muhammad Abed, a bespectacled, studious fourth grader who said he wanted his school to reopen, was on the streets with scrapes and bruises on his nose, upper lip and chin. He said a police tear gas canister had hit him in the face at one of this month's protests.

The Popular Committee organized the removal of mounds of rotting garbage that had piled up during the strike, but not before it attracted rats, residents

said.

In an exception to the strike, nurses at the agency's clinic vaccinated children against polio as part of a scheduled World Health Organization program. Mai Abd al-Razzaq, 49, had come with her daughter, Fatima, 5.

Mrs. Abd al-Razzaq, a mother of seven, said that her son in first grade "has forgotten everything he learned." Her husband no longer works. The family has not received its sugar, rice and flour rations for weeks. Mrs. Abd al-Razzaq said the family was dependent on help from relatives and neighbors and had run up a debt at the grocery store.

"The Palestinian Authority is doing nothing," she said. "Why talk about independence and statehood? They should be supporting the people."

Asked about a solution for the refugee problem, Mrs. Abd al-Razzaq laughed and said: "It is impossible to return." But she added: "We insist on return. We don't want to give up our rights. We will leave it for the generations to come. We don't want our grandchildren to say we sold out the land."

Dr. Shaker Rishq, chairman of the area staff union of the United Nations agency in the West Bank and supervisor of the clinic in Jalazoun, said the strikers' demands included equalizing pay in the West Bank, where the cost of living is high, with other areas where the agency operates, particularly Gaza. That, he said, would involve a salary increase of 10 percent or 11 percent.

The strikers are also protesting the agency's recent termination of temporary contracts for 53 workers employed through job creation programs. Some, Dr. Rishq said, had been on temporary contracts for years and should be considered full employees. He accused the agency's administration of "rigidity" and avoiding serious dialogue.

A meeting last week involving the Palestinian Authority's prime minister, the refugee agency's commissioner general, and representatives of the union and the Popular Committee ended inconclusively. The prime minister, Rami Hamdallah, called for the strike to be suspended for the sake of the camp residents, and for the agency and the union to give another chance to negotiations under the umbrella of the Palestinian Authority.

In a statement this month, United Nations Relief and Works Agency officials said that pay increases were “financially impossible” but that solutions could be found for the workers on temporary contracts.

The agency already has a \$65 million shortfall in its annual budget of \$675 million. In Gaza, a school meal program for nearly 250,000 pupils was cut this year.

Nisreen Sheikh Qassem, 37, a school supervisor who is on strike, took out a bank loan equivalent to two months’ salary, which she can pay back with low interest over 15 months. “We will go on,” she said, “until we have achieved our goals.”

Outside the camp’s main entrance, youths were throwing stones, goading Israeli soldiers among the olive trees between the camp and a nearby Jewish settlement. Some were masked and swinging slingshots. Near this same spot a few days into the strike, Wajih al-Ramahi, 15, from Jalazoun, was fatally shot in the back by an Israeli soldier.

“They used to come in the afternoon,” said a neighbor who identified herself as Umm Zakaria. “Now,” she added, “they start in the morning.”