

## The Truth, Not Antiques, is Buried in Nahr al Bared

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**By Rima Merhi**

When I worked with the Lebanese government two years ago, we launched a media campaign that made three promises to the Palestinians: “The reconstruction of Nahr al Bared camp is definite, displacement is temporary and return is guaranteed.”

Lebanon must deliver these promises. To every politician in my country, I say if the team of officials you sent a few years ago to the camps left in tears, what have you left for the victims of Nahr al Bared who have been shoved in prefabricated steel containers for two years?

Buried in the rubble of Nahr al Bared is the truth, not antiques. Only this truth will protect the lives of Lebanese soldiers, the victims of Nahr al Bared, and the security of Lebanon.

More than forty interviews with major stakeholders this summer left me in no doubt that there had been no real investigative reporting by the media on Nahr al Bared, especially that the Lebanese army had denied access to journalists during the crisis.

People in Lebanon still wonder who is behind Fatah al Islam. How did Shaker al Absi, the leader of this group, escape when the Lebanese army was besieging the camp for over 100 days? Why are the testimonies of Fatah al Islam detainees still withheld from the public? Why was military commander of Nahr al Bared operations assassinated? What happened to the army spy linked to Nahr al Bared? Who was responsible for the looting of Palestinian homes and the racist graffiti written on their walls? Are there antiques in Nahr al Bared or is it another excuse to delay reconstruction?

Lawyer Nizar Saghieh believes the Lebanese government should call for a national investigation into Nahr al Bared. “At the very least, it would be an admission by the government that many questions remain unanswered,” he said.

These unanswered questions lie at the heart of deteriorating Lebanese-Palestinian relations post Nahr al Bared.

Until this day, no one can enter or leave Nahr al Bared – including over 15,000

inhabitants who live amidst the ruins – without a permit. The army continues to control all four main entry and exit points.

When I obtained a permit from the Lebanese army to visit the camp this summer, it became very clear to me why the army wanted a DVD copy of everything I recorded before publication.

I found thousands of Palestinians literally shoved in door-to-door type steel containers – initially used as emergency housing in 2007. They freeze in the winter and burn in the summer. Up to six human beings, including children, sleep on the floor, eat, and live in the same space. The tiny “bathroom” consists of a hole in the ground with no shower or bath. Beside the bathroom is a kitchenette where streams of cockroaches, ants and flies enjoy leftover food.

This is not the point where we point a finger at the UNRWA. It’s unfair to blame the organization for all the ailments of Palestinian society in Lebanon, especially that some UNRWA staff died on the job attending to the needs of Palestinians in the crisis. The refugees remain the primary responsibility of the international community at large. In collaboration with the Lebanese government, UNRWA remains accountable and committed to improving living standards, but the needs of refugees are many times beyond available resources.

At a time when swine flu cases have been reported in Lebanon and winter is approaching, this situation also poses a potential health hazard, especially given the number of Lebanese and foreign social workers who walk in and out of the camp everyday.

Alarmed, I went searching for a hospital and came across a 24-hour emergency unit – the Palestinian Red Crescent. I walked past it four times before I realized the roof made of zinc and covered with stones was it! I found two beds, frequently used by the doctors due to housing shortages, and a small “lab.” I stood motionless as thirsty flies from the window nearby took a dive in the blood samples being tested.

I was petrified of catching a virus or disease that I would bring back home to my family and friends. But I had to have deep respect for the doctor who risked his life everyday and burned in the heat without AC, consoled by the mere fact that he could drive critical patients to neighboring hospitals around the clock. Clearly, the reconstruction of hospitals and clinics, access to healthcare, education and proper personal hygiene is critical in Nahr al Bared.

With the help of the international community, many shops in Nahr al Bared have opened including bakeries, grocery stores, pharmacies, and even a place offering internet access and a mobile phone shop among others.

But army checkpoints are killing economic revival at a time when Nahr al Bared was known to have excellent trade and social relations with its surrounding area. The emotional damage is also so severe that some Palestinians have referred to Nahr al Bared as another “Nakba”.

Surely, we owe these Palestinians an explanation for what really happened in Nahr al Bared. And we owe an explanation to the families of almost 200 soldiers who were killed in this battle.

The quest for the truth must not die, and Nahr al Bared shall rise again. You can put a price on an antique, but the hopes and dreams of thousands of refugees living in despair are priceless. The truth, which will foster transparency and accountability so we can build Lebanon, is priceless.