

Search for Peace in the Middle East

A brief record of efforts by WILPF to further peaceful solutions of the conflict in the Middle East

Missions and Meetings Policies and Actions

1930 - 2000

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Foreword

(to the second printing)

This brief record of a 70-year long effort by WILPF to further a peaceful and just solution of the Arab/Israeli conflict in the Near East was first published in 1997. At the time, in spite of warning signals and 'facts being established on the ground' in the Occupied Territories by Israel which were increasingly putting into question the Israeli/Palestinian negotiations launched by the Oslo Declaration in 1993, we all hoped that a sense of justice, wisdom and courage on the part of world leaders would lead to the establishment of a viable, independent Palestinian state within the borders delineated by the armistice agreements prior to the 1967 war.

It was in this hope that WILPF decided in 1998, and confirmed in 1999, to accept its Palestinian section's invitation to hold its 28th International Triennial Congress in Jerusalem, Palestine, in 2001. Preparations for the Congress began with much enthusiasm but also some apprehension. The breakdown of the 'Oslo Process' in 2000, followed by the uprising of the Palestinians and the excessive use of force by Israel in response, forced WILPF's Palestinian Section to withdraw its invitation early in January 2001. In agreement with its national sections, WILPF decided to postpone the holding of its 28th Congress to the year 2004 and instead hold an International Executive Committee meeting with extended powers in Geneva.

The meeting will be preceded by a seminar on "Women's Actions to Break the Barriers to Peace in the Middle East and Other Regions". This booklet, an updated version of the one issued in 1997, includes activities carried out up to and through the year 2000. It is to serve as a reference document for the seminar and the meeting of the International Executive Committee which follows. The record does not include all WILPF resolutions and statements nor does it list every activity undertaken by the organization as a whole. It attempts to give an overall picture of WILPF's struggles, hopes and growth in dealing with this particularly complex but also highly sensitive issue.

WILPF will continue its efforts to help achieve peace in the Middle East. Too many lives are being lost in this conflict, and there is too much destruction of land and homes and families; too many children are being deprived of a future in their homeland, and too many resources are going to the military at the expense of economic and social development and co-operation among all people there. The resulting instability and fear affects not only the people in the Middle East but people around the world. No other conflict has the potential to ignite a worldwide conflagration as has the conflict between Israel and the Arab world. The world community has a stake in finding a speedy resolution. The United Nations must at last

assume responsibility for achieving a just peace between Israel and Palestine based on its own resolutions.

Edith Ballantyne

Convener, WILPF's Committee on the Middle East

Geneva, June 2001

Foreword

(to the first printing)

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom is one of many international organizations I came to know well during my years as chairperson of the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

In 1990 WILPF and others asked me, and I accepted, to be one of their advisers on promoting talks among women of the Middle East. Later I agreed to be chairperson for the first of these talks in Geneva. I want to share this experience because the development of similar dialogues can serve in other conflict areas.

"We know we can live together. We have done it before and we can do it again", said one of the Palestinian women I met during my fact finding tour in the Middle East in preparation for the Geneva Dialogue.

Between the autumn of 1990 and May 1991, the time we met in Geneva, I travelled to Jordan, Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, to find out if it was possible for women from all sides to come together and talk about the situation in the Middle East. It was an exiting experience and useful for the preparation of the talks. I spoke with many persons, both men and women, and many of them said that it was impossible to bring Israeli and Palestinian women together to talk about peace. It would be better to drop the idea.

I listened and continued to talk and talk with all those I was able to meet. And the more I listened and talked the more important it became to me to bring the Israeli and Palestinian women together because they had so many hopes and aspirations in common. The most important was every

one's wish to live in peace. "We want an end to the conflict" was their claim. They were tired of the ongoing violence. I also learned, that the way each side talked and argued was very similar.

When I asked them if they were ready to participate in a dialogue in Geneva, the Palestinian women told me that they had difficulties to obtain papers and permission to travel abroad. So, I met with Israeli government officials to seek their help – and I obtained their promise — to ease the travel of the Palestinian women. I had also to convince some of the women, on both sides, to come to Geneva and take part in the dialogue.

I remember in Jerusalem, when I invited women from both sides for dinner, I was warned that no one would come. They all came.

There were practical problems about having the meeting at the UN building in Geneva. These were resolved in time and the Israeli, Palestinian and PLO women arrived to join in talks with a group of invited international women who had experienced conflict and knew something about conflict resolution.

After the opening of the meeting, we had workshops on different aspects of the conflict and how to reach peaceful solutions. There was a wish to conclude the dialogue with a statement all could accept. As expected, it was a most difficult task of all. After discussion until late into the night, or perhaps more correctly into the early morning hours, a participant came to me and suggested that the 'international' participants should draft and adopt the statement and leave those from the Middle East out of it all. I refused the proposal. Two hours later the women agreed on the wording and adopted it a few hours later at the closing meeting.

Why should women talk on issues such as the Middle East or any other conflict area? I am convinced that women find solutions more easily than men. They care less about prestige or 'losing face' than do men and they never give up. They are eager to exchange experience and learn about one another.

Both Palestinians and Israelis have suffered as wives and mothers and sisters. Fathers, sons and brothers, and also sisters, have served as soldiers and have lost their lives and have been maimed in the violence and war. They all have the same worries and fears.

Now, I hope the Middle East Question will come to an end and the people there will live together in peace and in friendship. They have much in common.

Annie Marie Sundbom Chairperson

Geneva Middle East Women's Dialogue

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

Peace in the Middle East

The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) has been concerned with the question of Palestine since the early twenties. Alert to the explosive nature of a situation in which two peoples, belonging to different religions, were struggling for a new future in a land under the mandate of a foreign power, WILPF members began to establish links with women in Palestine seeking peaceful ways of sharing one land.

Over the years, WILPF has dispatched numerous international missions to the region and, since the early 1950s, has had working groups or standing committees on the Middle East conflict to promote understanding, mobilize public opinion and lobby for changes of government policies that would lead to peace in the region. With the same aims national sections, in particular the US and Swedish sections, have organized and funded many activities, such as tours of women's groups from their countries to the Middle East region and inviting Jewish and Palestinian women to their countries to speak from a shared platform. At meetings and through local and national media, sections provided information and also concrete assistance for the realization of some of the projects of the WILPF Middle East sections.

What follows is a brief overview of WILPF's efforts to further peace in the Middle East. It includes also a brief record of activities of the Swedish and US sections because of their specific involvement in these efforts.

Mission to Palestine, 1930

Growing tension and fear of open conflict between Arabs and Jews in Palestine engaged the attention of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in the 1920s. Britain's policy of duality by acknowledging the Jewish right to a homeland in Palestine (1917 Balfour declaration) and at the same time kindling and strengthening the national

aspirations of the Palestinians was bound to bring trouble to the area. Concerned by the growing rift, WILPF decided to send a mission to Palestine. It was partly realized in 1930, when Elisabeth Waern-Brugge, a prominent WILPF member from Sweden, agreed to go to Palestine with the intention of forming WILPF groups in which Jewish and Arab women could meet and work in co-operation with one another.

Although a Jewish WILPF group existed already in Tel Aviv, Ms Waern-Brugge decided that Jerusalem was the city in which to begin her efforts. She succeeded in bringing Jews and Christian Arabs to meet together but was unable to persuade Moslem women to take part. She was disappointed later when the Christian Arab women, who had attended meetings with Jewish members in Tel Aviv, decided not to become part of the group. She succeeded however in forming a WILPF group of Moslem women in Ramallah.

The deepening feeling of mistrust of the Arabs toward the Jews, and the inability generally of Moslem women to act independently of their husbands, made co-operation among the women of the different religious beliefs impossible at the time. This was a disappointment to WILPF, but it did not diminish its concern over the developments in Palestine and the Middle East as a whole.

Elisabeth Waern-Brugge's mission, while only partially successful, was the beginning of an intimate involvement by WILPF in seeking a peaceful solution to the conflict in the region. Seminars were organized to inform and be informed of what was happening in the region and to seek ways to help bring about co-operation between the two peoples destined to share the same land.

Mission to the Middle East, 1958

The genocide against the Jews in Hitler's Germany, the migration of Jews to Palestine, the UN decision to partition the land, the Arabs' refusal to accept the decision, and their war against Israel created new problems and dangers for the region and the world.

In line with its tradition of sending fact-finding missions to conflict areas, WILPF, in 1954, again discussed the possibility to send a mission to the Middle East. Two years later, Madeline Bouchereau, an active WILPF member whose husband was Haitian Counsel in Hamburg, set off on the mission. She visited seven countries between 4 April and 4 June 1958:

Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Jerusalem (Jordan). The purpose of her mission, as she wrote in her report, was "to meet with both public and private persons and to listen with understanding to the problems, the prejudices, and the longings of the people there." She saw the mission as "an opportunity to see conditions personally and to talk face to face with people of differing opinions and backgrounds" in order to help WILPF "in its understanding of the urgent problems of the area."

Madeline Boucherau submitted a detailed report of what she did and whom she met to help her understand the issues that seemed to be particularly pressing ones in the countries she visited. In Egypt, for example, her interest centred on economic issues, whereas in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria, she put social and political problems at the top of her enquiry. Having been told much about Israel's poor treatment of its Palestinian population during her visit in the Arab countries, she paid particular attention to this issue when visiting Israel. She believed that "the world will judge the good faith of Israel by the way its Arab citizens are treated". She concluded her report of the mission with an outline of "trends to be taken into consideration in analyzing the situation:

- Misery and obscurantism of the Arab masses and necessity of better utilization of natural resources.

- Impact of Islam. More than 90 per cent of the people are Moslem and deeply attached to their religion, which is one of the great religions of the world. (To understand the Arab people one must have a sympathetic knowledge of the Moslem religion.)

- Gathering ferment among the Arab people for better social and political conditions. Dissatisfaction with the feudal regimes which have failed to provide these better conditions.

- General distrust of the West because of past colonialism, creation of the State of Israel and present attempts to dominate the Middle East politically and economically.

- Ferment of hatred against Israel, primarily because of the Arab refugees and fear of expansionism.

- Need of oil resources of the Middle East. Europe cannot survive without Arab oil.

- Recognition of Russian interest in the Middle East. With the development of the USSR as a world power it cannot accept Western domination of this

neighbouring strategic area.

-Widespread Arab nationalism. Almost everybody in the Arab world is for Arab unity to increase strength and power of the Arabs and use their wealth to the advantage of the people.

-Aggressive Egyptian leadership under the guidance of Nasser that will revive the past grandeur and glory of the Arab empire.

Right of self-determination of the national population. Arab countries should be allowed to develop along the lines of their own choosing.

-Desire for neutralization and disarmament.

The ongoing discussions within WILPF, and the dialogue that had begun between WILPF members and Arab women in the region led to the establishment of a WILPF section in Lebanon in 1962.

The Middle East conflict within WILPF

Catherine Foster, in her history of WILPF, *Women for All Seasons*, (University of Georgia Press), writes on page 29: "Bouchereau's first-hand experiences with the oppression of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel as in other parts of the region prompted her to point out to other members the extent of the Jewish-Arab conflict – a mere foreshadowing of the controversy over this topic which continued in WILPF for years to come. The League had and still has a sizable Jewish membership; for Jewish and also non-Jewish members, memories of the experiences of Hitler's fascism were very deep. That fact, together with little personal knowledge of Arabs as a people, made League members loath to be too critical of Israel at that time. A decade later, some of their views had evolved, however, and by the mid-1960s, WILPF would begin to study seriously the problems of the Middle East and to question its manner of relating to them."

It must be mentioned here that there were always members, Jewish and non-Jewish, who shared the views expressed by Dorothy Warner of Great Britain, when introducing the discussion on the Palestine/Israel conflict at the meeting of the International Executive Committee in 1948: "Personally, I am against partition – it seems to me to represent a negation of the general trends of progressive development. To think that partition is a solution of the Palestine problem is, I fear, to take a dangerously short view of the question. That it appeared as the way out to those in authority is an example of the chain of error set up by an initial mistake. But the State of Israel does exist...It has been recognized by the two greatest

world powers and today such a fact cannot be ignored. Somehow or other perhaps we can find a way of persuading the Arabs not that the Jews have a "right" to the state of Israel but that it would be politically wise to accept the creation of a Jewish state as one act – and it must be one of several – which will tend to promote, however slowly, a more peaceful state of affairs in the Middle East".

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s WILPF meetings provided the verbal battleground on which the Israeli/Palestinian conflict was played out within the organization. It took a long time to succeed in establishing a dialogue between the members of the Lebanese and Israeli sections and to cool the emotions of participating members from outside the Middle East. Walkouts from meetings were not uncommon at that time.

In 1964, WILPF established a peace research consultative group convened by Johanne Reutz Gjermoe (Norway), with Elise Boulding (USA) as chair and Ingrid Eide (Norway), Fujiko Isono (Japan), Sushila Nayar (India) and Sheila Young (Canada) as members. Johanne Reutz Gjermoe was also WILPF's Middle East rapporteur and had initiated a dialogue (by correspondence) which involved members of the Israeli and Lebanese sections. The collection of the contributions was submitted for discussion to the 1969 International Executive Committee.

Mission to the Middle East, 1967

Johanne Reutz Gjermoe and Ingrid Lindström, at the invitation of the President of the Palestine Arab Women's League and with the support of the Nobel Committee, visited Lebanon, Israel and Jordan in the first part of 1967. They returned only a few days before the eruption of the 'six-day war' which changed the Middle East map very considerably. In her report to the International Executive Committee later that year, Reutz Gjermoe put forward the following points on which she thought WILPF could agree:

"-The UN must guard the present demarcation lines by placing UN peacekeeping forces on both sides, until a peaceful settlement has been achieved.

-If either party refuses to negotiate directly, the UN is urged to seek the co-operation of the big powers in:

(a) securing free passage for all nations through the Straits of Akaba and Tiran and the Suez Canal;

(b) imposing a total embargo on arms to the Middle East;

(c) working out an adequate plan for immediate aid and for social and economic development for the whole area.

-Following these emergency measures a permanent peace settlement must be agreed upon.

-Israel must be recognized as a State by the Arab countries.

-Israel must acknowledge that a solution acceptable to the refugees must be found.

-Israel must agree to withdraw her troops from the territory which she has occupied in the last war, in return for a permanent settlement.

-The recent crisis in the Middle East is a vivid illustration of how the protracted operations of the UN, UNEF and UNTSO peacekeeping forces – while necessary and useful – sometimes may postpone the search for a solution of the disputes which had led to the conflict. The stopping of the conflict this time must not lead to the perpetuation of the dispute, but to a permanent settlement with peace and justice."

Middle East mission, 1975

In the early 1970s, the longtime president of the Israeli section retired due to poor health. The person who took over knew little about WILPF and membership dropped. It also became evident that the mailings from the section had little to do with WILPF policies and peace efforts but much to do with the promotion of Israeli government policies and actions.

Johanne Reutz Gjermoe retired as Middle East Rapporteur, leaving a vacuum in WILPF's Middle East work. Meanwhile the situation in Lebanon had become tense, and Israeli policies toward the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories were severely repressive with increasing expulsions of Palestinians to Lebanon, bulldozing homes and practising other forms of collective punishment, arbitrary detention and torture, confiscating Arab land and accelerating the building of settlements around Jerusalem and throughout the Occupied Territories. These acts caused not only severe suffering to the Palestinians, they fuelled resentment and hatred and increased the already highly tense relations in the region.

At the insistence of the Lebanese section, a small WILPF delegation, composed of Libby Frank, chair of the US section's Middle East Committee, and Edith Ballantyne, WILPF's Secretary General, went to Lebanon, Syria and Israel in April 1975. The mission resulted in a number

of recommendations, including the suspension of the Israeli section on grounds that it did not function in accordance with WILPF objectives and programme, and the adoption of a forward-looking statement on the attainment of peace in the Middle East.

The report of the mission and the recommendations made were discussed and adopted at the meeting of the International Executive Committee held in the same year in Germany. Although the statement of policy has been amended several times in light of political developments in the region, it remains WILPF's basic position on the Israel/Palestine conflict.

Other WILPF missions and new WILPF sections

Since 1975, many WILPF groups, particularly from Sweden and the USA, as well as many individual members have visited Israel and the Occupied Territories, and a number of missions went to the region. WILPF members have been asked by other organizations to contribute to seminars, advise on policy and have been invited to take part in missions. In 1994, WILPF members were invited to speak at a seminar on building democratic institutions and on the question of Jerusalem, organized by the friendship societies of Sweden and Palestine.

A new WILPF section was formed in Israel in the early 1980s and officially admitted in 1983. A section was formed in the Occupied Territories in 1987, and was formally admitted in 1989.

Mission to Israel and the Occupied Territories, 1990

Responding to an appeal from the Israeli and Palestinian sections, the 24th WILPF Congress held in 1989 in Sidney, Australia, agreed to send an international WILPF delegation to meet with the members of the two sections to give them support and help foster co-operation between them. The delegation's purpose was also to meet with other women's and peace groups to demonstrate our solidarity with them, strengthen contacts and search for ways to contribute to peace.

The delegation of four – Eleonore Romberg (International President), Edith Ballantyne (Secretary General), Kerstin Grebäck (Co-ordinator of the Swedish section) and Joyce Asfour (Member of the US section's Middle East Committee) – began its mission in Tel Aviv on 6 June 1990 and ended it in East Jerusalem on the 14th.

The programme organized by the two sections was intensive. The delegation met with members of each section and the two sections

together. It met with many other women's, civil rights and peace groups as well as politicians, visited refugee camps, towns and villages in the Occupied Territories. Those who had been on earlier missions were alarmed by the grave deterioration of the situation. The eating away of the Palestinian area of Jerusalem through destruction of homes and confiscation of land, the growth of Jewish settlements around Jerusalem and throughout the Occupied Territories, the suffocation of the Palestinian economy and serious lack of health care and educational opportunities could only lead to an explosion unless stopped and reversed.

The hard working and courageous Israelis struggling for a peaceful solution to the conflict, and the fact that the majority of Israelis called for peace, gave hope. With women in the centre of peace activities, earlier ideas of planning dialogues among Israeli and Palestinian women took concrete forms by the time the delegation left Jerusalem.

Israeli/Palestinian women's dialogue, May 1991

WILPF, with a number of international NGOs and the Israeli and Palestinian coalitions of women's organizations, brought to Geneva 10 Israeli and 10 Palestinian women as well as 10 women from other countries torn apart by conflict or with experience in conflict resolution and conciliation for a three-day peace dialogue. Representatives of international NGOs were invited as observers. The gathering was made possible by a generous financial grant from the Swedish government. The exchange was an enriching one. Although the Israeli and Palestinian women did not agree on every point, they did work out a statement in a final all-night session which they presented to the press the following day. (See text pages 13 to 15 in box).

Other conferences and dialogues

In the late 1970s, WILPF organized a dialogue at Cartigny, Switzerland, between Israeli General Martyi Peled and PLO member Izzam Sartawi in which, in addition to WILPF members, representatives of non-governmental organizations in Geneva took part.

At the UN sponsored International Meeting for NGOs on the Question of Palestine in 1983, WILPF was one of the founders and a longtime member of the International Co-ordinating Committee of NGOs on the Question of Palestine. It took an active part in organizing many seminars, and workshops, and assisted in dialogues between Jews and Arabs. WILPF also took a leading part in organizing an international NGO conference/dialogue on peace- in the Middle East in Florence, Italy,

December 1991; in Geneva, Switzerland, June 1992; in Malta, December 1993, in each one ensuring the participation of Israeli and Palestinian women working for peace in the region. p

Final Document

(adopted by the women's dialogue, May 1991)

Women share a vision of freedom and equality which is born out of our common struggle against discrimination, oppression and subjugation of any type, be it on the basis of gender, religion or nationality.

We, Palestinian, Israeli and international women, declare our commitment to a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the basis of U.N. Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 ("Territories for Peace"): two states, Israel and Palestine co-existing peacefully within secure and recognized boundaries.

To this end, we support negotiations between the Government of Israel and the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, the PLO. We believe that women have a special responsibility in signalling the urgent need for peace between Israelis and Palestinians, in the absence of which the vicious cycle of violence will accelerate. We firmly believe that women can play a unique role in facilitating dialogue between the two peoples in an effort to remove obstacles to reconciliation. We call for an end to the building, funding and expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories.

In their first meeting following the Gulf war, women from Israel, Palestine and thirteen other countries met in Geneva from May 13-15 in order to discuss the peaceful resolution of the conflict and to propose concrete steps toward advancing a peace process.

During the two days of workshops and meetings, the major topics of discussion were:

International strategies for the implementation of U.N. resolutions on Palestine and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

We believe that there is an urgent need to take active steps to lobby the U.N. as well as their respective governments for the immediate implementation of U.N. Security Council Resolutions which call for a

withdrawal of Israel from territories it occupied in 1967 in exchange for peace.

Regional security and arms control

There can be no security without peace. Security must be built on mutual respect, on economic, human, social and cultural co-operation, and on respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The Middle East conflict can be resolved only through negotiations and the conclusion of peace treaties based on guaranteed security for all the parties involved. The accumulation of arms and military resources pose a threat to the security in the region. We therefore call for:

1. A limit on weapons transfers to the area.
2. All countries in the region to ratify the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the Convention on Biological Weapons, and all future treaties and conventions banning weapons of mass destruction, such as the convention on chemical weapons. This will open the way to a region free of all weapons of mass destruction.

Human rights and international protection for Palestinians in the Occupied Territories

We recognize the harsh reality of human rights violations in the Occupied Territories. These result in the unacceptable reality of fear, humiliation, degradation, separation, exile, imprisonment, physical injury, and death.

We support the continuation and intensification of fact-finding delegations and observers, both from the international community and from Israeli and Palestinian groups and individuals, to highlight individual cases and disseminate information.

However, we also recognize that violations of human rights and other such actions are rooted in the non-recognition of the collective rights of the Palestinian people, and that further action is required to redress specific violations, to ensure international protection of the Palestinian population in the Occupied Territories, and to move toward a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

We call upon:

1. The United Nations to implement Security Council Resolution 681.

2. The signatories of the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949) to convene a meeting at the request of the UN Secretary-General.

We resolve to work toward the establishment of:

1. An international network of women on issues of human rights, peace and "two peoples two states".
2. A permanent presence of women in the Occupied Territories, broadly representative of the international women's movement.

We strongly condemn the arbitrary restriction of freedom of movement of Palestinians by the use of "Green ID Cards".

Occupied Territories.

We call for universities around the world to form twin school relationships with the universities in the Occupied Territories.

The impact of demographic changes on the conflict

We express our concern about accelerated development and expansion of the settlements, taking advantage of the current mass wave of Soviet immigration.

We call for the observance of, and compliance with, the Geneva Conventions against population transfer.

We note with concern the economic and social consequences of the occupation on possibilities for future development.

We recognize that the immediate economic problems of the inhabitants of the Occupied Territories demand urgent solutions. Most urgent is the need to halt the confiscation of land and water resources.

We call for:

1. The establishment of an independent economic infrastructure in the Occupied Territories, to lay the groundwork for a Palestinian State.
2. Financial assistance from governments given to Israel should be matched by equal assistance to the Palestinians to develop their economic infrastructure.
3. Direct Palestinian trade with other nations.

4. Investment in the Occupied Territories by the international financial community.
5. Increased work opportunities for Palestinian women;
6. Direct aid, through international relief funds, to the Occupied Territories to be used for rebuilding destroyed homes, medical care, and for all costs incurred by detainees and their dependants in procuring legal assistance and welfare.
7. An end to the occupation, the major source of economic and social crisis for Israeli society and for Israeli women in particular.

We resolved that the Final Document of the conference be presented to the United Nations Secretary-General and to the International Committee of the Red Cross by the Conference Chairperson, Annie Marie Sundbom.

There were issues on which we did not reach agreement, and which we hope will be the subject of further discussion.

Mission to Lebanon, 1995

Ever since the 15-year-long war in Lebanon ended in 1990, the Lebanese section had asked for an international WILPF delegation to see at first hand the situation in the country. A grant from the Swedish Foreign Office finally made this possible and a small delegation, including Edith Ballantyne, International President and convener of the WILPF Middle East Standing Committee; Kerstin Grebäck and Ingela Mårtensson of the Swedish section and members of the Standing Committee, visited Lebanon from 25 November to 3 December 1995. The main purpose of the mission was to learn about the situation of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and, more generally, about the impact the peace process had on the Lebanese people and the country's economic reconstruction.

With the help of WILPF members, both Lebanese and Palestinians, and staff members of the UNICEF, UNRWA and UNDP offices there, the delegation was able to visit refugee camps in Beirut and other parts of the country, seeing for themselves the miserable conditions in which the Palestinians lived. The delegation also visited kindergartens, schools and clinics. Sixty per cent of UNRWA's budget goes to education and the rest to health care and relief. But UNRWA could never do more than meet the most basic needs, and its purchasing power has been dwindling. The

situation would be much worse were it not for the continuing support given by non-governmental organizations and very committed private donors. The delegation visited villages and met with the Prime Minister and other officials, and had long talks with a woman parliamentarian and with Palestinians having responsibilities in the camps. Below are extracts from the delegation's report:

"We were shaken by the conditions in the camps and were appalled by the devastation of the countryside, with schools laid to waste by fifteen years of fighting, by Israel's invasion and constant military harassment before the invasion and since the withdrawal of its army. It is high time that Lebanon be left in peace and that Israel withdraw from the South and stop its bombardments and surprise military actions so that reconstruction can properly begin and the country regain confidence in the future.

"The mission began in Beirut where more than a million of the country's estimated population of three and a half million live. It must be one of the world's largest construction sights. There were cranes everywhere, clearing away mountains of rubble or moving building materials for the construction of new hotels and high-rise buildings. Priority seems to be for rebuilding the country's tourist and service industry rather than providing much needed housing for the people. The whole area along the water front and reaching inland, is taken over by a business coalition with government support, paying little in compensation to the former property owners. Buildings that survived the bombings are torn down, putting the small shopkeepers out of business and home, thereby adding to the internally displaced and poor people of which Beirut has many thousands. They include Lebanese and Palestinians driven from the South by the ongoing bombings by Israel of villages and towns, and the poor from the city's camps as they lose space to the expanding area marked for the construction of more hotels and a vast recreation complex.

"The war spared few city quarters and one sees damaged buildings everywhere. The city's infrastructures are being slowly rebuilt but electricity breakdowns are frequent and walking on the potholed streets and sidewalks requires attention. The re-established telephone system remains precarious with all telephone wires exposed, knotted at intersections to lamp posts to keep them off the ground but unable to protect them against air attacks and accidental damage. One has to marvel at the will and the energy of the people to keep repairing and rebuilding. Transport is for the most part by car for those who can afford to own one or by taxi. This leaves a large part of the population on foot, exposed to the perils of a congested and highly polluted city.

"The experience of the civil war, the invasion and partial withdrawal of Israel's armed forces, Israel's continuing overflights and bombings of parts of the country, and above all Israel's ongoing occupation of the Southern part of Lebanon, keep the country in a state of tension and uncertainty about the future.

"At a seminar on 'Lebanon and Palestinian Camps', organized by the WILPF section, we learned much about the history and the current situation of the Palestinians in the country from two brilliant speakers: Dr. Elias Saba, former government minister responsible for the economy, and from Dr. Rosemary Sayigh, a sociologist, researcher and writer, both from the American University in Beirut.

"No one is certain just how many Palestinian refugees are actually living in Lebanon today. More than 340,000 are registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) which is responsible for this population. It is believed, however, that many have quietly left the country to study or work elsewhere but have kept their names on the register in order to have the right to return. The majority of the Palestinians in the country continue to live in heavily overcrowded camps. The people are extremely poor and live in the most miserable conditions, as we, our small WILPF delegation, found out..

"Contrary to other Arab countries, Jordan and Syria for example, Lebanon does not extend civil rights to the Palestinian refugees. They do not enjoy the right to work outside the camps. They do not have access to government-supported higher education, hospitals and clinics. Private schools, hospitals and other medical services that are open to them are far beyond their reach. There is now fear that doctors may even be forbidden to work inside the camps. We saw women and men lying in pain in their dark, one-room dwellings, waiting in vain for urgently-needed medical treatment or surgery which UNRWA cannot provide.

"Most of the families in the camps are allotted a one-room dwelling in which they cook, eat, sleep and care for those sick in bed. For the most part, the families are large,

frequently up to 12 heads. Washing facilities and toilets are shared. With cuts in financial assistance and the impossibility to earn anything to add to the UNRWA allowance, families have difficulty feeding themselves adequately.

"The worst off are the refugees who have been displaced by camp closures, expulsions from areas being bulldozed to make room for hotels

and other profitable tourist enterprises. Many of the 'displaced' are from the South of Lebanon where camps were closed or destroyed during and after the Israeli invasion. The conditions in which they exist are indescribable.

"There is frustration and anger, a feeling of abandonment and a sense of betrayal by the international community, the Arab world and the Palestinian Authority. Less international financial aid is given to the Palestinians in Lebanon than to those in the West Bank and Gaza. The future of UNRWA has been put in question while the establishment of an independent Palestinian state at the end of the dragging Israeli/Palestinian talks is uncertain. What is the future of these refugees?"