

Gaza children go back to school bearing scars of war

AFP, Beit Lahia

Some 200,000 Gaza children returned to school yesterday for the first time since Israel's offensive, many having lost family members, their home and their sense of security.

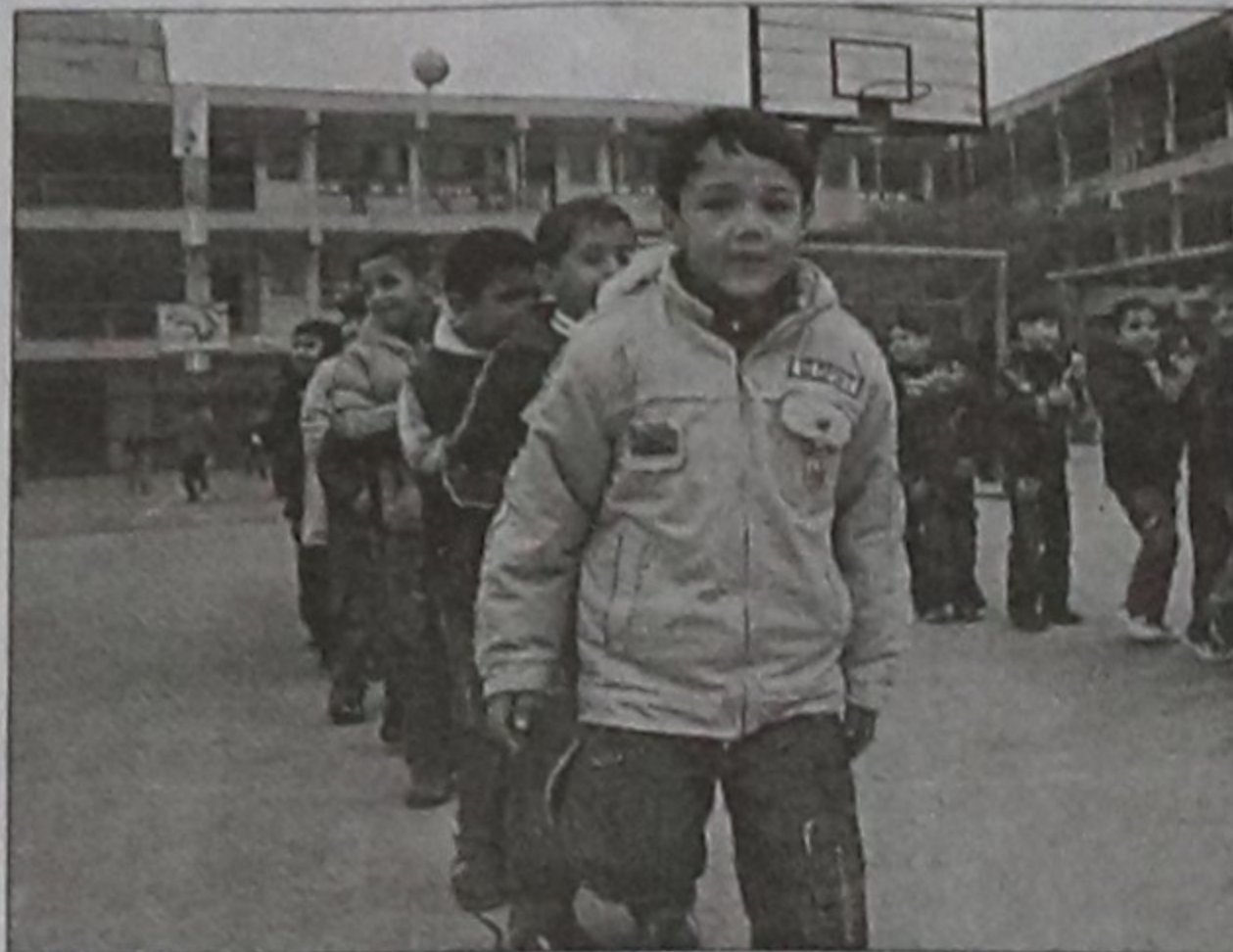
The UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) reopened all its 221 schools which educate some 200,000 Palestinians in the territory and provided shelter to tens of thousands of people during the fighting.

At Beit Lahia primary school the children swarmed into the wide courtyard with their oversized backpacks, noisily running and playing beneath an upper-storey classroom scorched by an Israeli shell.

The compound was struck a week ago and set alight, sparking panic among the 1,600 people who had gone there seeking shelter. Two boys, five and seven years old, were killed and around a dozen people were wounded, including their mother, whose legs were cut off, according to the UN.

It was one of three schools sheltering displaced people which were hit by Israeli fire during the war. At another UN-run school nearby more than 40 people were killed by Israeli shelling on January 6.

The Israeli military said it had taken fire from in or near each of the buildings, but UN chief Ban Ki-moon called the attacks "outra-



Palestinian schoolboys play during recess at a school run by UNRWA in Beit Lahia in the northern Gaza Strip yesterday while picture on the right shows other students inspecting a burnt classroom. Some 200,000 Gaza children returned to school for the first time since Israel's offensive, many having lost family members, their home and their sense of security. The UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) reopened all its 221 schools which educate Palestinians in the territory and provided shelter to tens of thousands of people during the fighting.

geous" and demanded those responsible be held to account. As the hundreds of children were slowly brought to order it soon became clear that many of them bore the unseen wounds of the war, in which more than 1,330 Palestinians were killed, nearly a third of them children.

"Come forward if your mother or father was martyred," headmaster Riad Maliha announced through a megaphone to the classes lined up outside for morning assembly. "Come forward if your house was destroyed."

More than 20 students walked to the front to register with UN officials so their families could receive aid, including Anas Abbas, a shy 12-year-old boy.

"They destroyed our house

and killed five of my neighbours. The Jews came very close to us," he said, his brown eyes looking away.

Like the other children, he renders his experiences in one-word answers and simple sentences, keeping most of what he has seen to himself.

Maliha, the headmaster, says the first few days of school will be given over to counselling, with teachers trying to help the children express themselves.

"In the classes the teachers will encourage them to talk about what happened, or to draw pictures or to write about it," he said.

UNRWA, which provides basic aid and services to most of the 1.5 million people living in Gaza, employs some 200 counsellors and is looking

to recruit more in the wake of the war.

"Imagine what the conversations are going to be like," UNRWA spokesman Christopher Guinness said. "There are going to be thousands of traumatised children coming to school today."

On the upper floor of the school the children drift in and out of the burned-out classroom, chalk graffiti scribbled on its blackened walls and broken desks littering the floor.

In the classroom next door the teacher invites the children to come up to the front and tell their stories. The first boy to volunteer recalls when the house next to his was blown up.

"The door was dancing. The windows were dancing,"

he says as the other children break into laughter.

Khitam Aziz, the school counsellor, says the children ask about the scorched classroom upstairs and the holes in the walls left by artillery rounds.

"They ask me why they shelled the school, and tell me they worry it will be attacked again," she says. "But we tell them the Jews will not attack the school. They should feel safe. They should play."

Half of Gaza's population is under 18 years of age and more than 80 percent of its people rely on UN food aid.

Both Israel and Hamas declared unilateral ceasefires last Sunday and Israeli troops had completely withdrawn by Wednesday. But vast swathes of the territory have been left in ruins, including thousands of homes.

Saudi warns US over Middle East

BBC Online

A senior member of Saudi Arabia's ruling family has warned the US that it needs to change attitudes over the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Prince Turki al-Faisal, a former Saudi intelligence chief and former ambassador to the US, said a failure to alter policies could threaten links.

The prince said ex-President George W Bush had left a "sickening legacy" in the Middle East.

He accused the US of contributing to the killing of Gazans.

The prince made his comments in an interview with the London-based Financial Times newspaper, following a post-Christmas outbreak of violence between Israel and Palestinians that left more than a thousand people dead.

On Thursday Barack Obama made his first public statement on the Middle East as US president.

Assad greets Hamas on Gaza 'victory'

AFP, Damascus

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad congratulated Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal on the Islamist movement's "victory" over Israel in Gaza at a meeting in Damascus yesterday, official media said.

Assad "congratulated the Palestinian people on the victory scored by the resistance in the Gaza Strip," the official SANA news agency said.

"Israel's inability to achieve its objectives despite using the deadliest weaponry is proof of the devotion of the Palestinian people to its territorial rights and its deep belief in victory against occupation and aggression," it quoted Assad as saying.

Meshaal and his delegation responded by expressing their "deep appreciation of Syria for its efforts at all levels to support the resistance of the Palestinian people in Gaza during and after the Israeli aggression."

The Hamas delegation is to set off on a regional tour to "thank certain countries which have supported the Palestinian people," SANA added.

Syria provides a base in exile for Hamas's political leadership, including Meshaal.

The Islamist group has controlled Gaza since June 2007 when it ousted forces loyal to Western-backed Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas.

Sudan denies human rights violations

AFP, Khartoum

Sudan has denied committing human rights violations against displaced people in Darfur, where 33 civilians were killed by security forces in August according to a UN probe.

"We deny the facts," foreign ministry spokesman Ali al-Sadiq told AFP late on Friday.

A joint probe by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN-African Union peacekeeping mission in Darfur said on Friday that Sudanese "government security forces committed violations of international human rights law against the civilian population of Kalma IDP camp," on August 25.

UN investigators said police and security forces searching for weapons in Darfur's biggest camp for internally displaced people (IDP) were confronted by a group of camp residents who

sought to stop them entering. "The security forces fired shots in the air, before opening fire on the crowd," killing 33 people, including 10 women and nine children, and wounding another 108 of the camp's residents, the United Nations said in a statement.

"The security forces used lethal force in an unnecessary, disproportionate and therefore unlawful manner."

Sadiq said Sudanese forces entered the camp to seize weapons being stockpiled there and shared the information with the United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur.

"When the information became very solid, we took the decision to get rid of the weapons," he said.

Sudan considers Kalma, an impoverished and volatile camp in South Darfur, as a source of support for the ethnic minority rebels it has been fighting for the past six years.

Bomb kills three police in Fallujah

AFP, Fallujah

Three Iraqi policemen were killed and nine people wounded yesterday when a car bomb exploded near the western city of Fallujah, a senior police officer told AFP.

The attack came at 10:30 am (0730 GMT) as the police patrol headed back to their base in the town of Al-Garma, 10 kilometres (six miles) east of the city, said Fallujah police chief Colonel Mahmud al-Issawi.

The three dead policemen included a senior officer, the colonel said, with a further three officers among the wounded.

In late December, two car bombs killed 19 policemen in Fallujah, a former insurgent bastion 50 kilometres west of the capital Baghdad.

Belgian charged for killings at creche

AFP, Brussels

A 20-year-old Belgian man has been charged with killing two infants and a 54-year-old female employee at a child daycare centre and has been remanded in custody, a prosecutor said yesterday.

The man, who was arrested Friday shortly after the rampage, was interrogated by police and then brought before a judge later that day who charged him and placed him under arrest, said the prosecutor in Termonde in western Belgium.

The accused, whose identity has not been released, was also charged with attempted murder, the prosecutor said.

Ten children and two staff were wounded, some seriously, in the attack in the town of Dendermonde near Brussels.

After staff opened the door, the man barged into The Country of Fables daycare centre with a 30-centimetre (12-inch) long knife and began slashing some of the children lying in beds, none more than three years old, officials said.

During the police interrogation, the man who had his face painted white with black around his eyes - making some think of the Joker character in Batman - gave no indication about his motives for the attack, a prosecution spokesman said.

Iranian envoy urges Obama to review Mideast policy

AFP, Tokyo

A special envoy of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad urged US President Barack Obama yesterday to fully review its Middle East diplomacy and respect Tehran's nuclear programme.

"If President Obama wants to realise a change, he should stop support for Israel and withdraw from Iraq," Samare Hashemi, on a visit to Japan, said in an interview with Japan's public broadcaster NHK.

He also said that relations between Iran and the United States would improve if Washington "respects rights" held by Iran, including its nuclear programme, according to NHK.

On Thursday, Hashemi handed Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso a letter from Ahmadinejad saying that Iran wants to build closer ties with Tokyo for peace and stability in the

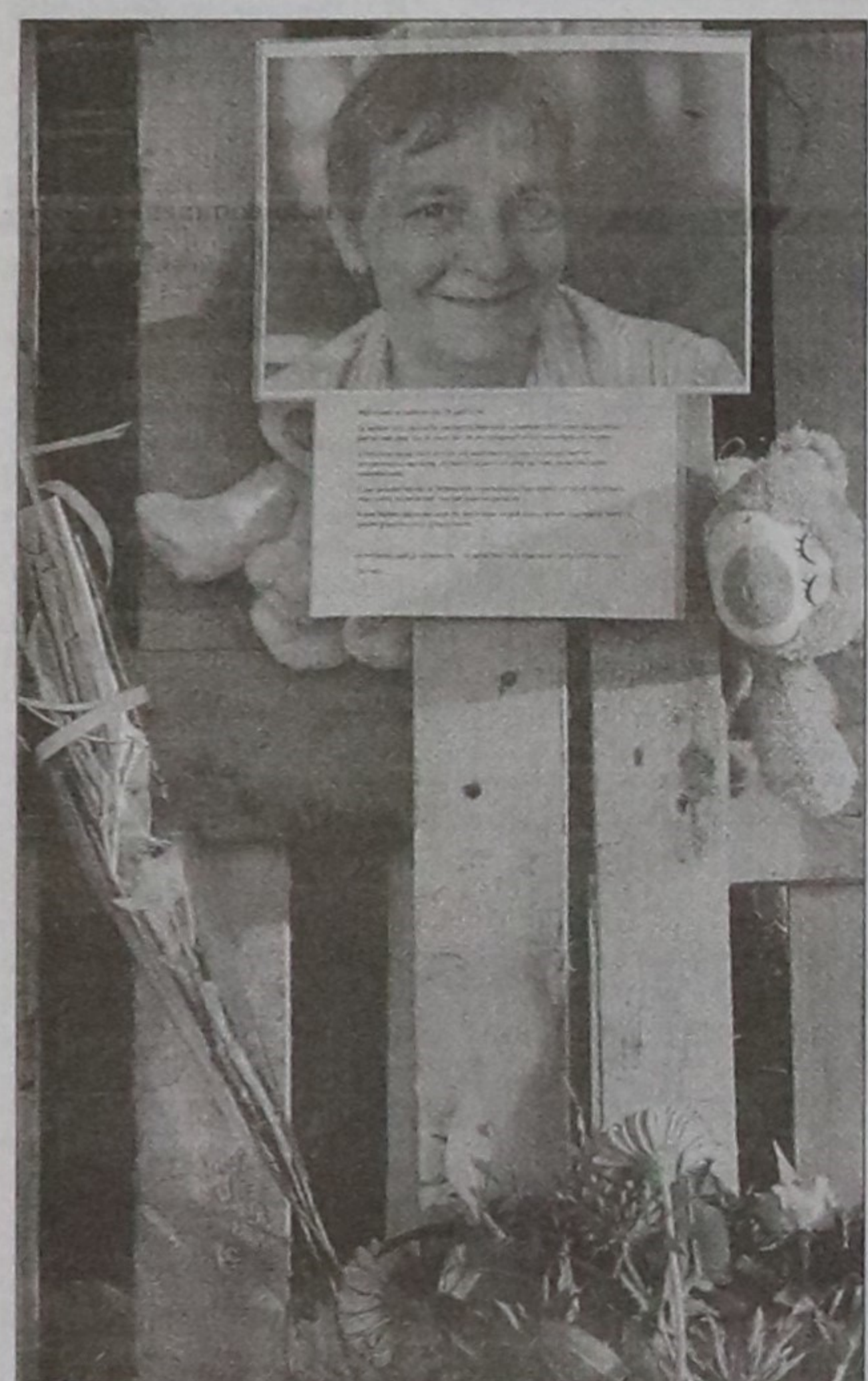
Middle East, including Gaza.

Washington severed ties with Iran in 1980 in the wake of the Islamic revolution after Islamist students stormed the US embassy in Tehran and held 52 diplomats hostage for 444 days.

Obama's predecessor, George W. Bush, refused to engage in direct negotiations with Iran unless it first stopped enriching uranium, and spearheaded pressure for economic sanctions against the Islamic republic.



US President Barack Obama (C) makes remarks on the economy during a bi-partisan meeting with members of Congress on Friday at the White House in Washington, DC.



Tributes and a picture of a 54-year-old employee are seen outside a child daycare center in Dendermonde, in western Belgium yesterday, 2009, a day after a man went on a rampage, killing two infants and the employee of the centre.

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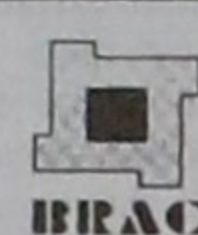
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Dhaka Seminar

Venue : British Council, 5 Fuller Road, Dhaka
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For more information please contact:
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