

WORLD & NATION

Church-run summer camps help Palestinian youths

By Judith Sudilovsky
Catholic News Service

BIR ZEIT, West Bank — Foreign volunteers at church-run summer camps in the West Bank and Gaza are teaching the local volunteers — as well as campers.

Since the whole concept of summer camps is something novel in Arab society, foreign volunteers who bring with them previous summer camp experiences are teaching local volunteers how to be creative and innovative with projects for the campers.

"Working here is completely different than working in a Canadian camp," said Monica McAuley, 28, a dietitian from St. Patrick Parish in Victoria, British Columbia. Like the other five volunteers in Bir Zeit, McAuley worked in the camp as part of a six-week program sponsored by World Vision, a U.S.-based development program.

"There is a whole family involvement in this camp; a whole community involvement," she said, adding that children take ideas from the camp home to their families.

The Latin-rite Patriarchate of Jerusalem began sponsoring summer camps through its parishes about four years ago. This year, for the month of July, six parishes in the West Bank and Gaza as well as nine parish-



CNS photo by Debbie Hill
Volunteer Monica McAuley helps Palestinian children paint refuse cans at the Bir Zeit, West Bank, church summer camp in July.

es in Jordan held camps for 2,600 youngsters.

Last year when the volunteers took the campers through Bir Zeit to pick up garbage, everybody stared at them, said Julia Matheson, 25, from Toronto, Ontario. But this year, she said she noticed a change in the way people think about littering in the village, and the roads are a lot cleaner.

"We had some effect. I see a noticeable difference in the kids' behavior," she said. The local teen volunteers, many of whom come back to an afternoon session for teenagers, said they believe that by volunteering they are enabling the younger members of the village to have an experience they never had.

"It is very important for the kids to develop their talents," said Moneer Shaheen, 18, one of the local volunteers. "I wish they had had this camp for us when I was younger, but the situation wasn't the same then. Now we are in peace."

But the work at the camps is not all done out of altruism, said Bir Zeit's parish priest, Father Emil Salayta, who has organized the patriarchate's camps.

The churches know that through these summer camps they are building the youth of tomorrow, he said. So though the camps are fun and relaxed, they are trying to instill

ideas such as volunteerism, teamwork, fair play and camaraderie into the youngsters.

In addition to the usual summer camp activities of sports, music, and art are discussion groups for the older children and catechism classes for all ages.

Father Salayta uses his parish camp as an experimental model for the other camps and has introduced a program intended to teach the children the importance of volunteering — another concept making its way into the Arab community.

Children are encouraged to help around the village and then bring back a signed slip that states what and when they helped someone. At the end of camp, an award is given to the campers who helped the most.

The parish priest in Gaza, Father Manuel Musallam, said in a telephone interview that his parish's camp is the only recreational outlet for the almost 200 youngsters who attend. There are 10 foreign volunteers at the camp.

"Without the camp the children would be lost, in the villages, in Gaza. They would remain without any hope of activity," Father Musallam said. "They are suffering. They have nothing. We provide them with a release. They will explode because they are enclosed. This is how we give them hope, how we build for peace."

Several countries deny religious freedom, says report

WASHINGTON (CNS) — In the midst of Washington's oppressive midsummer heat, one of the hottest topics was another kind of oppression — denial of religious freedom.

Within a few days in late July:

- The U.S. State Department issued an 86-page report on problems with religious freedom in 78 countries around the world.

- The U.S. Senate amended a foreign aid bill to suspend aid to Russia if that nation enacted pending legislation to curtail religious liberties.

- Efforts failed in Congress to deny most-favored-nation trade status to China because of religious persecution and other human rights violations.

- A House Judiciary subcommittee held hearings on a proposed Religious Freedom

Amendment, introduced by Republican Rep. Ernest Istook of Oklahoma to reverse what he regards as an erosion by the courts of the Constitution's guarantee of free exercise of religion.

Russian President Boris Yeltsin July 22 vetoed the restrictive religious legislation. But the large majorities with which the legislation had passed in both houses of Parliament the month before made a veto override a real possibility.

The proposed law would recognize only Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Orthodox Christianity as traditional religions, requiring other groups to register and wait 15 years for legal recognition.

Supported by leading Russian Orthodox officials but sharply criticized by Catholic and other Christian leaders, the legislation

was regarded as a repudiation of religious freedom guarantees in several international conventions Russia has signed.

Catholic officials said the law threatened the legal status of every Catholic parish and institution formed in Russia since the fall of communism.

Also on July 22, the U.S. State Department issued its report, titled "United States Policies in Support of Religious Freedom: Focus on Christians."

The report criticized the proposed Russian law and accused China of violating its religious freedom pledge by imposing strict government control over all religious activity.

It also condemned violations of religious freedom in numerous other countries. It said, for example, that Saudi Arabia pro-

hibits all public or private practice of any faith except Islam, and Sudan, despite a professed respect for all religions, "treats Islam as the de facto state religion."

On a visit to Rome, Bill Richardson, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, met July 23 with Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, the Vatican's secretary for relations with states, and gave him a copy of the new State Department report.

In a written statement to Catholic News Service Richardson said religious freedom was "the most important point" in his discussions with the Vatican official.

He expressed appreciation for Pope John Paul II's "continued moral leadership to secure freedom of conscience for all people."

Raymond Flynn, U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, who also participated in the meeting, said Richardson and Archbishop Tauran also discussed the pope's letter to Yeltsin urging a veto of the proposed Russian religious legislation and parallel U.S. efforts to get the bill vetoed. The veto of the law "was an objective we both shared," Flynn said.

The debates in Washington over religious persecution in China and possible withdrawal of most-favored-nation trade status prompted the director of China's Religious Affairs Bureau, Ye Xiao Wen, to challenge such criticisms in a speech in New York July 18.

Speaking at a luncheon at the National Council of Churches headquarters, Ye said the Chinese government is not "totalitarian" and media reports of religious persecution in China were "absolutely wrong."

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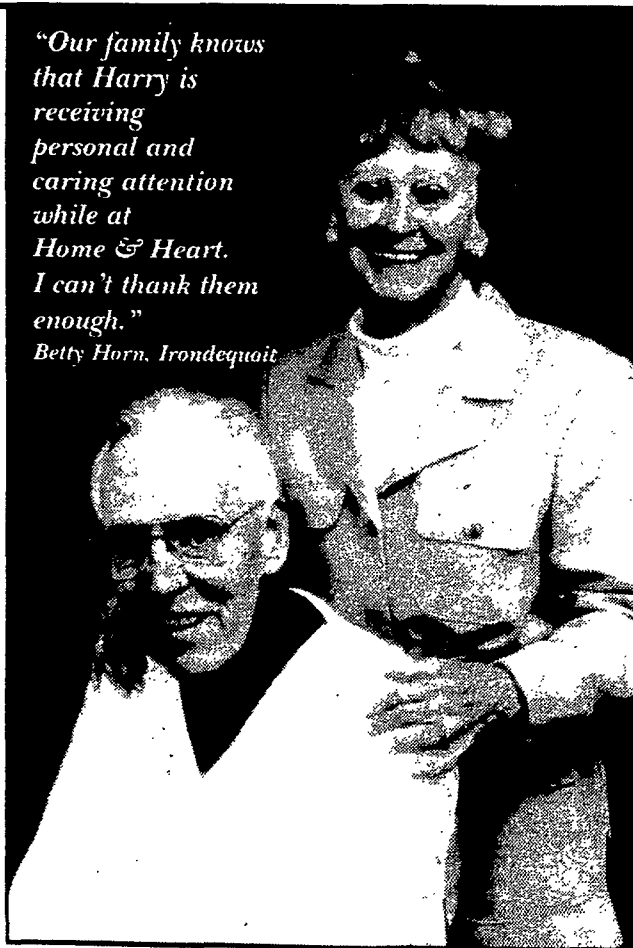
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