



Visitors called on the Asira Women's Center, one of five women's centers and two bakeries where food is prepared.

UN World Food Program Reps Takes a Look for Themselves - posted Thursday, April 12, 2007

"We jumped at the opportunity," confessed NEF staffer Sam Hussein, deputy director for NEF's West Bank/Gaza program. A six-month pilot project funded at \$400,000-plus, the joint NEF (Near East Foundation) and UN World Food Program project is feeding 10,000 Palestinian children in over 130 kindergartens in poor districts of Jenin, Tubas, and Nablus in the West Bank. Plus, it has initiated over 100 new jobs for area women with great potential to be ongoing.

NEF is implementing the project, in charge of all management, training, monitoring and evaluation.



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Hussein and Salah Abu Eishah, NEF program manager in the northern West Bank, personally escorted the two World Food Program officials. Arnold Vercken, World Food Program country director, and his colleague, Sarah Klonski, World Food Program program officer, left Jerusalem and "arrived in Asira in two hours after having to pass three checkpoints and numerous Israeli jeeps stopping us to investigate the reason for coming here...getting there was not easy, but it was worth the trouble," Hussein reported back.

They first went to the Asira Women's Center, one of five women's centers and two bakeries where food is prepared. "I am not sure what was on Arnold's mind as he entered, but I was glad to hear he left quite impressed. He informed me the women working there had great team dynamics.....there was an obvious family atmosphere...the place was clean ...the quality of the food excellent," Hussein said.

How did they know? Why they tasted...had several date cookies in particular, a personal favorite of Arnold Vercken.



NEXT STOP...KINDERGARTENS

At a nearby kindergarten, Vercken's reaction was more contained and cautious--"I guess this is how diplomats work," Hussein surmised. They visited all the classrooms in the kindergarten, filled with cheering kids who sang for them, heard the principal's gratitude for the food supplements--and left all smiles. And they kept smiling.

This NEF food supplement program of daily mid-morning snacks of fortified foods impacts on many levels--improving nutrition, increasing attendance, boosting school performance, providing jobs.

At the second kindergarten, the staff waited until their arrival to distribute cookies...the World Food Program administrators even handed out some cookies themselves. "It was a touching experience," Hussein recalled, "since they usually give cookies to the kids first thing in the morning. It seems to be the only thing they have for breakfast. The principal said parents send their kids to school to eat, and due to the food, attendance has gone up."



"The principle said parents send their kids to school to eat, and due to the food, attendance has gone up," NEF staffer Sam Hussein commented.

Official satisfaction with what they saw was evident. The World Food Program reps left the kindergartens extremely pleased and talked animatedly about their day in the car on the drive back to Jerusalem. This NEF food supplement program of daily mid-morning snacks of fortified foods impacts on many levels--improving nutrition, increasing attendance, boosting school performance, providing jobs....

"I think this small visit gave them confidence in NEF and that their program is really important in this part of the world. It also gave them confidence to want to do more projects with us in the future," Hussein concluded his email report with obvious satisfaction of his own.

According to recent data from the World Health Organization and UNICEF, the UN's children's agency, over 40 percent of Palestinian five-year-olds are anemic. Nearly 76 percent of children one-to-six years of age show signs of being or becoming vitamin A deficient. Also, 35 percent of all Palestinian families are food insecure and another 27 percent vulnerable to insecurity.

The joint Near East Foundation/World Food Program project is part of NEF's four-year, over-all effort to secure a better environment/education/nutrition for Palestinian pre-schoolers, simultaneously increasing both kindergarten quality and enrollment. The World Food Program is a strategic partner in the school feeding component; and NEF is continuing fundraising to create safe environments, good curricula and better trainer teachers. Recent studies show only 30 percent of Palestinian children are enrolled in pre-school activities before they formally begin their education.

This World Food Program project is scheduled to conclude in late July.

