



# A Different kind of school run

For students and teachers in Palestine, accessing education safely is fraught with difficulty. Stella Carroll, media officer with Sadaka, provides a first-hand account of overseeing a school run as a human-rights volunteer in the occupied territories.

A mural on the wall of Burin school in the West Bank poignantly declares 'It is my Right to Learn'. However, for many Palestinian teachers and pupils, returning to school each year rekindles fears of Israeli soldiers and settler violence.

A recent report from the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) cites an average of ten attacks on education in the Occupied Palestinian Territories per month. These include tear-gassing, throwing of stun grenades, delays at checkpoints, searches, arrests and the demolishing of schools. Barriers such as checkpoints or roads used by the Israeli military, illegal settlements and other military infrastructure make learning very difficult.

Two human rights organisations – Sadaka (The Ireland-Palestine Alliance) and Defence for Children International (DCI) – recently came together to launch a campaign in Ireland to highlight the difficulties faced by Palestinian children, and their educators, in accessing safe education. The campaign, titled 'A Different Kind of School Run', focuses attention on a concerted effort by a military power to block access to education.

During the 2019/20 school year, which was cut short due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, DCI Palestine documented 134 violent incidents involving Israeli forces between 20, August 2019 and 6, March 2020, impacting at least 9,042 students and teachers. Children have a right to a safe learning environment per the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which was ratified by Israel in 1991.

Nadil Awad, the principal of Burin Community School, reports that children

**"The soldiers make me very scared. When I come to the school, I don't know if I will make it back home. Maybe they will kill me for no reason or maybe they will take me to jail."**

Abdul, 16 years old, Burin Community School.

come to school in fear and that students have been tear-gassed many times by the Israeli military. He said: "The school is overlooked by the Israeli settlement of Yitzhar and there are jeeps here 24/7. A watchtower is just 200 meters from the playground."

Israeli settlements are illegal under international law and Yitzhar has been built on land confiscated from Burin village. Unlike other compassionate Israeli civilians, many Israeli settlers are armed. This hyper-militarized environment results in the infliction of disproportionate physical and psychological violence against Palestinian children.

I was a volunteer on the EAPPI Ecumenical Programme in Israel Palestine. Trained by the Quakers and funded by the World Council of Churches, I was among a group of international volunteers working alongside Israeli and Palestinian peace groups to monitor and witness life under the occupation.

One of our tasks was to accompany children to schools. Sometimes through checkpoints or past potentially violent settlers. Sometimes we encountered young Israeli soldiers on patrol and this

could often deteriorate quickly into a flashpoint of violence where students were attacked. The international presence often deterred the soldiers or settlers. Unfortunately, this was not always the case.

There was one memorable afternoon in 2017 when an illegal Israeli settler became incensed at balloons in the colour of the Palestinian flag as the local primary school sang and clapped as they celebrated a national holiday. The Israeli army was called and the situation deteriorated quickly with tear gas and stun grenades fired at the children and their teachers. The local village boys set fire to tyres to block the view of the soldiers. Then it seemed as if time stood still. Israeli soldiers fired live bullets. I stood watching soldiers shooting live bullets at eight-year-old children, asking them to stop. Rabbis for Human Rights were present, pleading in Hebrew for a cessation. Luckily no one was hurt, although Isawaya village was clouded in tear gas.

The school run in Palestine can be calm and without any events or it can escalate into something deadly very, very quickly.

Defence for Children Palestine notes: "Attacks on schools violate international humanitarian and criminal laws and are also one of the six grave violations against children in conflict that are identified and condemned in the UN Security Council's Children and Armed Conflict agenda."

Burin school recently attempted to expand by adding buildings where agricultural studies and animal husbandry could be taught as a practical subject, with hopes that the school could eventually evolve into two separate colleges, the main community school and a new agricultural college. In March 2021,

they broke ground on the foundations of the first out-house.

"The army came and demolished the foundations, confiscating a bulldozer and arresting the driver," said principal Nadil, who explained that they previously had applied to the Israeli authorities for a building permit but were refused. Notably, 92% of all requests for building permits from Palestinians are refused. Often, families, schools and businesses are forced to try and build anyway resulting in Israeli demolitions.

Sadly, one in four Palestinian children feel abandoned by the world according to the Save the Children report, *Hope in the Rubble*, which also highlighted that 60% of Palestinian children feel that their education has been jeopardised or interrupted by Israeli demolitions. Notably, 54 Palestinian schools in the Occupied West Bank have demolitions orders issued against them by Israel authorities.

One Wednesday afternoon in October 2020, Israeli bulldozers arrived at the small two-roomed school of Ras Al-Atin. The school was under construction with brick

walls, a tin roof and no doors or windows. Some 50 pupils aged from five to 13 years old were attending.

Noura al-Azhari, the school principal, said that they had started the academic year, although the school was still not ready, to provide education to the children who had to walk around seven kilometres and pass along a settler highway every day on their way to another school.

The school was deemed to be 'constructed without a permit' by authorities and demolished with the Israeli forces confiscating building materials from the site. Ras Al-Tin school was being constructed with EU aid.

Demolitions of singular schools and individual instances of harassment of students cause great pain to the children and their families, but they are also symptomatic of a much wider campaign of obstruction and disruption to children's education throughout the West Bank and Gaza, which is being conducted by the Israeli authorities.

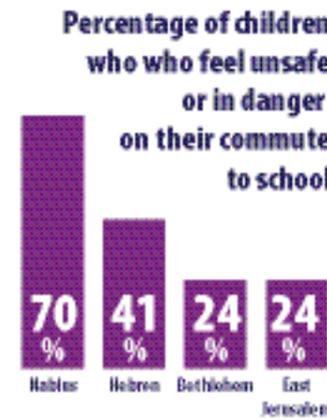
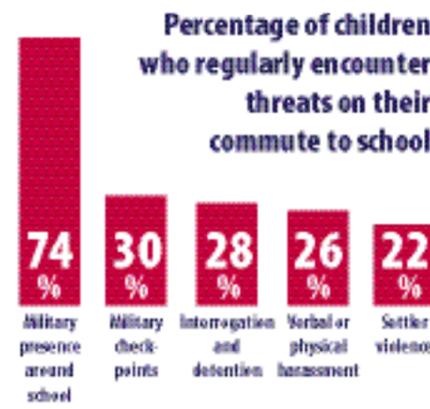
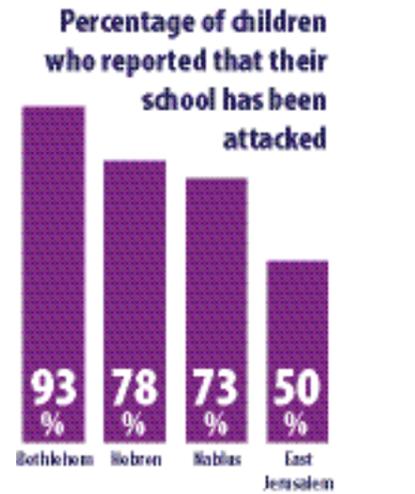
"Israel, as the occupying power, has failed to ensure that Palestinian children can



**"My dream is for the army not to come and attack us and [for us to] live a normal life like everyone else"**

Muna, Burin Community School Palestine.

A Palestinian man brings children home from school, Khan al-Ahmar, Palestine.





safely access schools," said NRC Secretary-General Jan Egeland. "The Israeli forces have instead themselves denied children education and demolished schools for vulnerable communities in the West Bank. "Israel's policies and practices toward Palestinian schools have created an environment of constant fear that traumatises children while abandoning its obligation under international law to not commit attacks on education."

Before the summer break,

**Facts: 10 attacks per month**

- The Norwegian Refugee Council reports an average of 10 attacks on education per month by Israeli authorities and settlers.
- Currently 53 schools in the Occupied Palestinian Territories have demolition orders held against them by the Israeli Authorities.
- According to the UN, over 10,000 Palestinian children attend school in temporary structures such as tents and shacks, without access to heating or air conditioning.
- Attacks on schools violate international humanitarian and criminal laws and are also one of the six grave violations against children in conflict that are identified and condemned in the UN Security Council's Children and Armed Conflict agenda.

Source: Save the Children report, *Hope in the Rubble*

Dáil Éireann unanimously passed a motion recognising that Israel has annexed large portions of the West Bank. Marie Crawley of Sadaka notes that it is in these very same illegally-occupied areas that these crimes against children are being perpetrated and will continue

if Israel is allowed to act with impunity. She said: "Ireland's political parties must ask themselves if the condemnation of breaches of international law is enough or does more need to be done to end these egregious violations against children?"

We need to be able to look forward to a future where Palestinian children can be safe and protected at school – a future free from harassment and violence.

A former journalist and active trade union member, STELLA CARROLL is the media officer for Sadaka, an independent organisation, which calls for Ireland's domestic and foreign policies to advance the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people. The views expressed in the article are those of the author.

The Sadaka/Defence for Children 'A Different Kind of School Run' campaign runs until 5 September; the campaign aims to highlight the disparities between the experience of Irish education with the educational experience of Palestinians to encourage the Irish Government to hold Israel to account for international crimes. For further information, visit [sadaka.ie](http://sadaka.ie).

As a member of the ICTU and the Trade Union Friends of Palestine, the INTO supports the ICTU's campaigns in solidarity with the Palestinian people.

**Twinning Irish and Palestinian teachers and schools – join the TUFPP webinar!**

Following on from the very successful November 2019 conference, 'Palestinian Children: Their Right to a Safe and Just Future', the three Irish teacher unions have been working together under the umbrella of Trade Union Friends of Palestine (TUFPP) to support the right to education of Palestinian children and to engage with Irish Aid's development aid programme for education in Gaza and the West Bank.

To this end, representatives of the group have in recent months met with the Palestinian ambassador to Ireland, Dr Jilan Abdalmajid, with representatives of the Palestinian Ministry of Education and with representatives of the General Union of Palestinian Teachers (GUPT). The meeting with the GUPT was also attended by a number of general secretaries and presidents of Irish teacher unions.

The group is working to build links on three levels – system to system; union to union and school/teacher to school/teacher.

Concerning the third of these – building links between teachers here and in



Palestine – the group is hoping to develop a twinning project between Irish and Palestinian schools. With this in mind, they are organising a webinar/meeting for anyone who might be interested in this work for September. This webinar is open to all teachers at primary and second level across the island of Ireland.

John O'Brien, chairperson, TUFPP Teacher Unions Group, explained: "You do not have to have any previous experience of doing something like this, nor do you have to commit at this stage. The purpose of this meeting is merely to gauge interest and have an initial

chat about what might be possible. Our objective is getting something set up before the end of the first term of the 2021/22 school year. If you, your colleagues or teacher friends would be interested in finding out more or attending the webinar, please email us."

To register your interest in the webinar, send your email address and name of your school to [tufpeducation@gmail.com](mailto:tufpeducation@gmail.com)

Keep an eye on [www.INTO.ie](http://www.INTO.ie) and INTO social media channels for details on the webinar, which will be confirmed soon.

**The Gambia Teachers Union**



Marie Antoinette Corr, General Secretary of The Gambia Teachers' Union, details the challenges faced by teachers in the west-African nation.

Every year has a few defining moments, but the year 2020 has contained so many world-changing developments that it was hard to believe that we would get through it. What started as a 'normal' year was tuned upside down by the deadly coronavirus pandemic. Even though it was difficult, we were steadfast in reaching out and serving our members.

On 17 March 2020, His Excellency, the President of the Republic of The Gambia addressed the nation on the status of the coronavirus and made a proclamation that all schools and educational institutions be closed to mitigate the spread of the virus. This decision, though necessary, was unexpected and, under the circumstances, the Ministry was confronted with an unprecedented situation. This brought a lot of trauma and uncertainty to everyone - individuals, institutions and the world at large.

The Gambia Teachers Union (GTU) have been proactive in its advocacy and activities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, receiving support from its key development cooperation partners, including the INTO, to provide learning resources in the form of solar-powered radio handsets. This complemented the Ministry of Education's initiatives and measures in the form of TV and radio programmes to make up for learning gaps due to school closures. It was a direct response to complaints and concerns from all quarters that the Ministry's online teaching programmes disadvantaged many students, especially those in the remote parts of the country. Access to network coverage for both television and radios and other social media platforms is unreliable, coupled with poor networking services compared to urban areas.

Other interventions by the GTU included the dissemination of advocacy materials in the form of T-shirts, stickers and posters to inform members about general World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines and COVID-19 restrictions in The Gambia.

A quantitative assessment, employing key interviews conducted by UNICEF, on the impact of gender-based violence (GBV) during the pandemic revealed that preexisting gender-related narratives have been aggravated during the



Items purchased with assistance from INTO grants last year, including solar radios and bicycles for transport in rural areas.



Learning resource centre

pandemic due to the lockdown measures which were put in place.

We intensified our advocacy and awareness campaigning, focusing on women and men at home in their communities, especially in remote rural areas. Radio programmes on GBV awareness were conducted on a regular basis.

The GTU also advocated on behalf of teachers in private schools who had not received their salaries as parents had not been able to pay school fees. The GTU leadership urged the Gambian Government "to come to the aid of schools worst hit by this pandemic". Unfortunately, not a single penny was paid to them.

In some ways, the pace of life has slowed down, and, of course, people are spending more time at home because of travel bans and COVID-19 restrictions, but, in other ways, we are busier than ever due to connections through technology.

The dawn of the 21st century has seen a number of technological developments, which have had an impact on almost every aspect of our lives. Most significant is the ever-increasing use of information and communication technology. Without ICT, the world as we see it today would come to a complete standstill. We are well aware that computer literacy is a necessary tool for learning enhancement

but it also allows us to gain access to various opportunities in today's wider world.

With support from the Steve Sinnott Foundation, we have been able to set up a fully-equipped learning resource centre at the GTU Secretariat, installing a digital classroom in one of the schools in rural Gambia to combat the digital divide. For the first time, the students at Nemakuta Basic Cycle School are able to access digital learning resources.

Elsewhere, other items have been purchased from INTO grants received last year. Bicycles have been provided to help students get to school in remote areas as some journeys to school can take more than an hour to walk each way.

Nobody could ever have anticipated the events of 2020-21. However, in times of great challenges, good lessons were learnt. The last 15 months have definitely been challenging for everyone across the globe and The Gambia is not an exception. It will be talked about for many years.

**MARIE ANTOINETTE CORR, General Secretary, The Gambia Teachers Union**