

Civil war means no school for Syria's children

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff

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In this picture taken on March 12, 2014, a Syrian girl (foreground) carries her brother as she walks between tents with other children (background) on their way to a makeshift school at their refugee camp in the Lebanese-Syrian border town of Majdal Anjar, eastern Bekaa valley, Lebanon.

MAJDAL ANJAR, Lebanon—Thirteen-year-old Anas walks through rain, mud and cold to go to class in a tent along Lebanon's border with Syria. He goes to school with 20 other Syrian children. The tent is home to a Syrian family. It also serves as a classroom for four hours each day.

The family is a refugee family, which means they fled from Syria to live in Lebanon. Their homeland of Syria is a war zone. The Syrian army is fighting its own citizens who want to remove the president of Syria. Many people have been killed, including children.

In the tent classroom, there are no benches and no blackboard, no textbooks and no notebooks. There are only sheets of paper and some pencils and crayons. Two young refugee women teach children like Anas how to read and write, count and draw, sing songs and read poems.

But even Anas might be considered one of the luckier ones. Syria has been at war for three years. Nearly half of Syria's school-age children cannot get an education because of the devastation and fighting, an international group called UNICEF reported. The numbers might even be larger. That is especially sad for a country where nearly all school-age children used to finish elementary school.

“These Sad Parents”

“They come every day, these sad parents, begging me to take their children to school,” said Etaf Seif Abdel Samad. She is the principal of a public grade school in Beirut. Syrian children there learn with Lebanese children, side by side.

The parents lost everything in Syria, she says. “All they have in Lebanon is the interest in their children’s future,” she said.

More than 2 million of those who should be in school remain in Syria. Some classrooms there have been bombed. Others are used as shelters or turned into places for soldiers to sleep. Another 300,000 Syrian children in other nearby countries don’t attend school, officials say.

Those numbers likely are higher. Experts say that puts a whole generation of Syrians at risk of coming of age without knowing how to read and write. UNICEF says it believes more than 10,000 children have died in the war.

The suffering the children have faced is especially bad. They go hungry and get sick, which slows their growth; a lack of schooling stops their education; and the bloody war causes deep psychological scars.

Pleading With Principals

Syrian refugees are increasingly desperate to get their children the most basic education. They plead with principals to take them into Lebanon’s overcrowded public schools. Parents also send children to classes in tents. Others offer them to mosques to study with religious leaders.

Children’s drawings hung on the plastic walls in Anas’ tent classroom and an out-of-season Christmas tree decoration dangled from the ceiling. Anas, the oldest of the children on a colorful carpet, wore a sweater and warm trousers. His feet were bare as he sat in the cold.

Anas was in fourth grade when his city of Homs in central Syria was attacked. That was nearly three years ago. He and his five older siblings haven’t been to school since.

In the tent, there were toys and stuffed animals for younger children, as well as some children’s English books. Hanadi and Dalal, the informal teachers, told the children a fairy tale.

“It’s not really a school, it’s more of an entertainment,” Hanadi said.

They teach children between ages 5 and 15. International charity Save the Children helps. Together, they try to offer children a taste of a life they would have lived had it not been interrupted by war.

Trying To Catch Up

“We are giving them the basics, letters and numbers,” the 23-year-old Hanadi said. “We mostly try to bring some joy into their lives. They’ve seen too much bloodshed.”

There are currently an estimated 400,000 school-age children in Lebanon. By the end of last year, they outnumbered their Lebanese peers by 100,000. Some 45,000 are now enrolled in Lebanon’s public schools, UNICEF says. Another 32,000 attend classes in the afternoon. They are trying to catch up and improve their foreign languages skills so they can go to other classes. Many struggle because subjects like math and science are taught in English and French in Lebanon. The Syrians speak Arabic.

Naima Mohedeen brought her daughters to Samad’s public school in Beirut. She left her youngest girl at home. She’s too young to go to school. Mohedden’s family fled to Lebanon only four months ago. Mohedeen, who cannot read, cried when she kissed her girls and said goodbye at the school’s entrance.

“I want them to learn everything so they have a future,” Mohedeen said. “I want them to become somebody. Somebody smart.”

Quiz

1. All the following about Syrian schoolchildren is correct EXCEPT:
 - (a) More than 2 million of them don't attend school.
 - (b) The civil war has caused them deep psychological problems.
 - (c) Many of them have taken refuge in Lebanon with their families.
 - (d) Some of them are studying in classrooms that had been bombed.

2. Select the paragraph from "These Sad Parents" that shows the Syrian people are desperate to get their kids to schools.

3. Which of the following contains a word that means "to run away"?
 - (a) Thirteen-year-old Anas walks through rain, mud and cold to go to class in a tent along Lebanon's border with Syria.
 - (b) The family is a refugee family, which means they fled from Syria to live in Lebanon.
 - (c) Syrian refugees are increasingly desperate to get their children the most basic education.
 - (d) Experts say that puts a whole generation of Syrians at risk of coming of age without knowing how to read and write.

4. Which of the following contains a word that means "to plead"?
 - (a) Two young refugee women teach children like Anas how to read and write, count and draw, sing songs and read poems.
 - (b) Together, they try to offer children a taste of a life they would have lived had it not been interrupted by war.
 - (c) "They come every day, these sad parents, begging me to take their children to school," said Etaf Seif Abdel Samad.
 - (d) Naima Mohedeen brought her daughters to Samad's public school in Beirut.

Answer Key

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