

From a Palestine

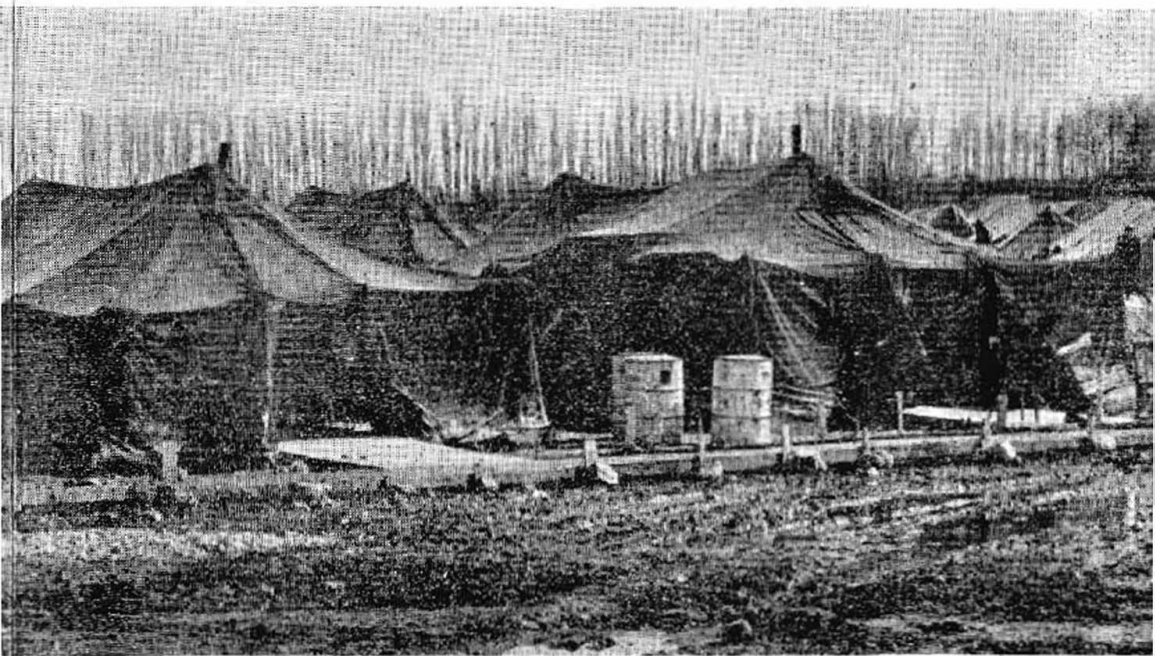
Oswaldo Ortega



Ghetto

THE Palestine refugee camp Naher el Bared (Cold River) appears pressed between the sharp mountain spurs that surround the city of Tripoli, a hundred kilometers north of Beirut, and the tempestuous and turbulent sea that breaks against the coast.

This encampment was established shortly after the first Arab-Palestine-Israeli war of 1948, and 23 years later, in the same amount of land covering 500 m², it shelters 15 000 refugees. A representation of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in the camp welcomes us and invites us to enter a small wooden shelter painted blue with a zinc roof, built right on the sandy beach (there is no more land to be used) which is both the medical





dispensary and the center of political discussions.

"We can't expand to the left nor to the right nor backwards. The only thing left is the sea," Abu Mustafa, one of the military and political commissars of the Front points out with an indescribable smile. Abu Taha and a third person called Mayed accompany him. On the shelves all around the shelter, there are vials of medicine for the communal use of the camp.

Inspecting the site, our conversation alternated with the sound of the buffeting waves breaking against the cement breakwater constructed on the coast to lessen their fury. A dialogue that can be picked up in any of the Palestine encampments as a universal model and applicable anywhere with simple changes of place and name. The aid they receive from the United Nations relief agency, divided by the numbers of people, would not be more than the equivalent of a dollar a month. Unemployment among the refugees is higher than 30% of the potentially active work force. A good number of them offer themselves for work on the lands of neighboring Lebanese owners as eventual agricultural day workers, for two or three pounds a day (a dollar equals three pounds and 25 piastras) for ten hours of work. Approximately 10% — a few professionals, professors and specialists — work in various services of the United Nations relief agency and earn the equivalent of about a hundred dollars a month. This is one of the few opportunities for some Palestinians in the camps with a certain level of training or capacity, to be relatively well paid.

The Lebanese Government does not grant them equal social rights with the natives, since they cannot be contracted by public organizations.

“Some 99% of the Palestine refugees are poor. What ideology meets the living conditions of the poor? Marxism-Leninism, which is one of the ideologies the Front has adopted to pursue its political and military action,” Abu Mustafa tells us.

The Arab Nationalist Movement, of which the Liberation Front is the political-military arm for the liberation of Palestine, arose in 1953, under the leadership of Dr. George Habash. In 1967 a fusion took place. The Palestine Liberation Front, led by Ahmed Yebren, and Heroes Returned joined the Front. In 1968 the Palestine Liberation Front again decided to take a road of independent action. During the last Congress it held in June 1970, in Amman, it proclaimed Marxism-Leninism as the official ideology of the organization and the name Arab Nationalist Movement was replaced by the Arab Socialist Workers' Party.

Its general lines can be defined in the following terms:

1 ● To develop an intensive political activity among the workers.

2 ● In the first stage of the struggle, an alliance with the petite bourgeoisie can offer advantages, but a strategic alliance with this group is to be avoided.



3 ● To demonstrate to the “elements afflicted with left infantilism” that a nationalist movement can become a Marxist-Leninist party because its people’s base is the revolutionary workers, peasants, professors and students, and its leadership is capable of meeting its historic responsibility.

Tea arrives as Abu goes on enumerating on his fingers, the enemies and friends of the Resistance. Among the former: “imperialism, Zionism, Israel and the reactionary Arab governments.” Among the latter:

The Arab national governments with whom we can have points of coincidence and discrepancies, depending on specific conditions and circumstances (for example, frictions arose over the acceptance of the Rogers Plan). The Arab peoples, the peasants and workers throughout the Arab world; the communist parties in the Arab world who wish to fight Zionism and Israel with arms in hand; the socialist and left parties of the world (international friends).

How would we define the strategy of the Front? “In the present stage, it is necessary for our combatants to know how to handle the rifle with their hands and the broadest concepts of Marxism-Leninism with their heads,” Mayed says, and after a brief pause, he adds:

There’s no water in the camp? The Front must be there to aid and resolve this problem. The same thing with education, illiteracy, social, medical and communal services. And



we can go beyond that. Our aid and collaboration are not limited to the refugee camps but take place among peasants and neighboring Lebanese villages. Our party works not only for the Palestine people but for all Arab peoples.

Is there some type of women's organization in the camp?

"The Palestine women, principally the young ones, have been acquiring a consciousness of their social duties. Many of them function as nurses, social workers, work in communal textile factories, receive political and military training."

And the schools?

"Three schools and 17 teachers for 3000 children."

They invite me to go through the camp. The day has not brightened. The zigzag central lanes are cement-paved, with a central canal so that waste can run down to the sea.

At both extremes, like a thick beehive, rows and rows of small huts constructed with bricks, rocks, boards or all of these materials, a little more than a meter and a half square, with mats on the floor for a mattress, a few blankets, a large metal plate hung on the wall, the tea kettle. The meager belongings of a people displaced for 23 years. The lanes around the huts are not cemented and the water, far from running, remains in stagnation. The camp is very reminiscent of a ghetto and a self-sufficient village. Strict limits, public baths, and a central market where certain refugees, more fortunate or more clever, rule over groceries, vegetable stands, small wares, meat, with the traditional beef or calf



decapitated and hung by one of his rear hoofs at the entrance to the shop. During the trip we noticed the endemic illnesses in the camp: malnutrition and parasitic infections. Farewells, good wishes, smiling, gesticulating

children surrounding the car. The new Palestinian generation. The return to dignity or immolation. Then Cold River will be no more than that, and never again the name of a refugee camp.

