

## The New Sounds of Peace: Laughter Fills Summer Camps for Children of War by David Snyder

After 34 days of war, a new sound is ringing out from the hills above the southern Lebanese city of Jezzine: laughter. And before you get out of your car at the hilltop Maria Aziz School, you had better make sure you have enough energy to keep up with 104 kids on vacation.

Such it is today at a summer camp in southern Lebanon run by CRS partner, the Development of People and Nature Association (DPNA). The days are filled with a range of events for the more than 100 children, ages 9 to 16, who are taking part in the six-day summer camp. And while the joy of this camp is instantly infectious, it masks the deeper meaning behind this camp's existence – that of providing for these children a safe place in which to forget the war they just lived through.

"Maybe their houses are destroyed. Maybe even a family member is dead," said Farah Hassouna, a Social Worker for DPNA and head of the summer camp in Jezzine. "So the main thing is that they can laugh here."



*Children playing games at a summer camp supported by CRS.*

Laughter is in no short supply, as each day of the camp is filled with games, activities, crafts and sports. But there are deeper lessons to be gleaned from this experience by the children attending: all of them are from one of four villages in the south that were directly impacted by the war. Throughout the week, the kids also take part in exercises that teach conflict resolution and communication skills aimed at creating dialogue. They are important lessons in an environment where reminders of just what these kids have experienced are often not far away.

### Deeper Lessons

"They talk about where they were during the war, in what city, in what school," Farah says. "They talk about the war, especially at night or in the free time."

The summer camp effort is part of the psychosocial programming now taking shape through CRS partners in southern Lebanon. As housing and food needs are met, CRS is seeking to address to the trauma many kids experienced during the war – an important part of recovery in post-conflict areas. After this first week of camp is over, two more groups, also bussed in from villages in the affected areas of the south, will arrive.



*Children taking part in an activity at a summer camp supported by CRS.*

Having given of themselves as volunteers throughout the war, Farah and the 28 other volunteers who run this camp spend up to 18 hours a day entertaining the kids here, all of them supported with food and transportation provided by Catholic Relief Services. A college student studying travel and tourism at a Beirut university, Farah says the challenges of working throughout the war, and now afterwards, have been extreme. But here on a sunny hilltop overlooking the beautiful rocky valleys around Jezzine, she is reminded often, she says, of the reasons why she was drawn to this work in the midst of such tragedy.

"We are very tired," Farah says. "But when you see the children laughing and having fun, you feel that you are doing something good for them, and you feel good."

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