

# Land-mine victims take the green option

NGO supplies survivors with all the tools to run organic farms – and turn a healthy profit

Elizabeth Hunter  
Special to The Daily Star

Fadi Khawand stands in a field of newly planted herbs surrounded by stunning cedar-speckled hills and winding roads near Sidon, in the formerly occupied town of Jezzine, South Lebanon. He inspects the broken irrigation tubes which criss-cross his land and curses softly. Figuring that some animal has been gnawing the plastic tubes to get water, he plans to stay up all night tonight, gun in hand, to catch the culprit.

A newcomer to farming, Khawand planted the herbs and installed the irrigation pipes just two months ago with the help of a project by the World Rehabilitation Fund (WRF), offering economic opportunities for land-mine survivors.

He points to the next hill: "That's where I drove over a land mine. I spent two months in the hospital with stomach wounds and took a year to recover." Khawand was employed by the Lebanese Army, but after the accident poor health prevented him from returning to the job.

This site is an example of the cooperative spirit being fostered in the project. The previous landowners left Lebanon, offering their land on a 50-year loan to Khawand's grandfather, who offered it to Khawand.

Khawand in turn offered five others the opportunity to use a plot to keep bees, raise chickens or grow herbs. He also acts as treasurer of a newly formed cooperative of land-mine survivors. The WRF provided the means to use the land.

When asked about his motivation for all of this work, Khawand smiles. "I like to help people. I like to work the land... and I have hope for the future."

"There is tremendous need among survivors of land-mine accidents or injuries," says



A cooperative member feeds her organically reared hens. The scheme provides vital support for land-mine victims

Photo by Elizabeth Hunter

Nadim Karam, director of the WRF's Lebanon programs. "But the programs that are available to address the needs of this sector of the population are very, very limited, if existent at all. Our project in Jezzine is the only one where survivors benefit personally."

Over three-year life of the project, the WRF will receive \$2.6 million in funding from the US Agency for International Development. The project currently works with 57 mine "survivors" (including widows of mine victims) and intends to expand to at least 200.

Poultry, honey and herb production are targeted, mainly

because they allow people who live scattered across rural areas to work close to home.

Survivors who are eligible to participate receive substantial material support. "In the case of egg production," explains Suzan Hallal al-Amine, projects officer with WRF, "each beneficiary is provided with a hen-house, equipment and accessories, fencing, 200 laying hens, poultry feed for three months, regular veterinary and technical assistance, and training sessions, as well as packaging and marketing of the final product."

The project also hopes to help "empower" the beneficiaries to manage their own projects, including quality control, marketing and sales of the products. To that end, the WRF initiated the creation of a cooperative of land-mine survivors.

For the moment, funding restrictions require the cooperative to limit its actions to those who are disabled or disadvantaged specifically by mines. Car accident survivors or their widows, for example, are not eligible. If such projects could be expanded to the unemployed and poor, it could help address the serious rural poverty problem which Lebanon faces.

"Look at the roads around us," says Chadi Haddad, marketing and sales manager for the

project. "In two hours, we have passed two cars. The area is economically depressed. This project is injecting resources into businesses which themselves then put money into their communities – it's a positive spiral."

Simon Boutros stepped on a land mine during the civil war and is now confined to a wheelchair. Members of his family help him look after more than 200 hens he received through the project. From his terrace, he overlooks a field of grapevines and olive trees where the chickens graze daily.

The eggs from this project are truly *baladi* (country) eggs. Their feed is closely controlled

to ensure that it is a "natural" mix of grains only, as opposed to feed meal made from animal carcasses. Also in contrast to industrial egg production, hens must have daily access to the outdoors and be fed greenery. A technician from the project checks in on the farmers and the chicks two or three times a week to ensure quality control and identify problems.

Each farm produces about 180 eggs per day, of which two-thirds are big enough to sell. After expenses, an individual can normally clear \$200-300 of profit a month. The eggs are currently being sold in local stores and through the American University of Beirut's Healthy Basket project, and a deal with a large distributor is being negotiated.

Help with marketing is perhaps the most useful aspect of the project for the farmers.

"Since the cooperative is going to take care of the sales," says Boutros, "I am better off working with them. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to do it. If there were no such thing (as the cooperative) that could take all my products, I would let the wolves come and eat the chickens!"

Despite the combined efforts of different NGOs and the Lebanese government, only 10 percent of the estimated 600,000 land mines in Lebanon have so far been removed, and government sources predict it will take at least seven more years to finish the clearing.

With programs like the WRF, though, the victims of land mines aren't left to struggle alone. The program is planned intentionally to hand over full control of the cooperative to the people that use it, giving the survivors of land mines the ability to run their lives again.

"Our team supports the cooperative to take charge of the project as we exit," says Karam. "The plan is, by the end of three years, to be out."

## STAR SCENE



Randa Berri and Krishna Sarkar



Dina Hammoud and Maryse de Pico



Rania Mehanna and Nandini Sarkar



Faten Shaer and Yuki Amaki

## Indians mark traditional festivals

Jihane Akoury  
Special to The Daily Star

Krishna Sarkar, wife of Indian Ambassador Nantu Sarkar, hosted a lunch Wednesday at her residence in Baabda celebrating two Hindu festivals, Dussehra and Diwali. Sarkar's guests included Randa Berri, wife of Speaker Nabih Berri, as well as the wives of Cabinet ministers, members of Parliament, ambassadors and other officials who were greeted by traditional Indian scents and sweets.

The Dussehra festival marks the victory of good over evil, said Sarkar, and Diwali is a festival of light symbolizing the victory of righteousness. Of all the festivals celebrated in India, she said, Diwali is by far the most important and is enjoyed by people of all religions.

Photos by Mahmoud Khier

## Afghanistan's young photographers step back into the light

New breed find beauty in destruction

Sebastien Blanc  
Agence France Presse

KABUL: Once banned under the Taleban regime, photography this week takes a new step forward in Afghanistan with the launch of the conflict-shattered country's first ever photojournalism course.

With stunning landscapes scarred by the horrors of war brilliantly lit by year-round sunshine, Afghanistan has long been exploited by foreign photographers. Now, thanks to a non-governmental media organization, AINA, 24 Afghan students are learning camera skills in the hope that their snapshots could eventually grace the covers of international magazines.

Student Fardin Wahizi recounts how he was imprisoned after running into a patrol of the militia's religious police while carrying a picture.

"One day I had taken a photo of the wedding of a friend. Then I came across a patrol from the Ministry of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue. I tried to hide the photo in my clothing," he says. "Because my beard was too short, they searched me and discovered the photo. I received 25 lashes and 15 days in prison."

Less than one year after the

fall of the Taleban, Wahizi now proudly carries his photo equipment – a simple wooden box on a tripod – everywhere.

The wooden boxes are the main educational tool used by Manoocher Deghati while teaching the 24 students, seven of whom are women.

"The main thing they want to portray is the misery and the destruction of their country. The suppression of spirit under the Taleban has redoubled their desire to do this," Deghati says of his students.

Deghati says the majority of his students had never touched photo equipment or a computer, now essential with the advent of digital technology.

But the course is not hurried. Students start with "vintage" film photography and developing techniques because, says Deghati, "it is important to put hands in the basin."

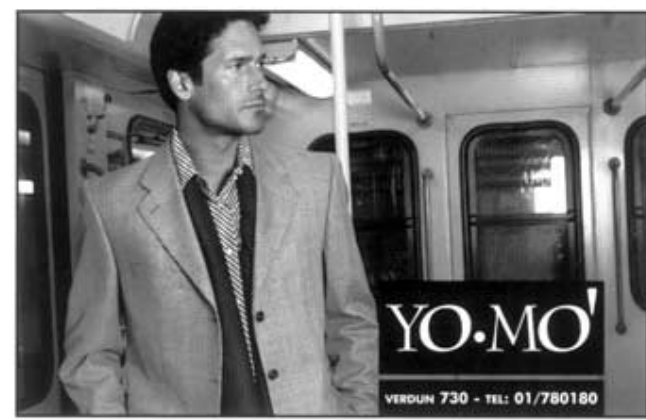
One of the students, 25-year-old Nazir Ahman, dreams of owning a Konica camera and working for the Kabul Weekly newspaper, published by AINA.

Fardin Wahizi, meanwhile, sees himself as snapping Afghanistan's archaeological sites, many of which have been destroyed and pillaged during the years of conflict.

## JUST A THOUGHT

When love is not madness, it is not love.

Pedro Calderon de la Barca,  
Spanish dramatist (1600-1681)



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## Youth center combines Halloween fun with useful learning experiences

'No heartbreaks! After all, it's Rainbow Island!'



"We wanted children to express themselves"



A fairy godmother makes her wish come true



A tiny would-be chef

Jessy Chahine  
Special to The Daily Star

The Rainbow Island youth center in Hazmieh hosted a Halloween party for youngsters on Friday and Saturday, with more than 200 children aged four to 14 taking part.

The young participants chose their own costume designs. For two consecutive days, they competed for the best disguise in front of a 12-member jury, as well as their friends and relatives.

"I think Lebanese children desperately need an occasion to address an audience," said Wadad Mroue, managing director of Rainbow Island. "This event was the right time and place to do it."

Mroue though the occasion was a very good exercise for the children, as they learned to become more confident.

"The 'getting ready' part in itself was much more difficult than the event itself," she explained. "The children had to

make decisions concerning their costumes, like choosing the personality that fits them most. They had to take initiatives, and work on themselves."

Supported by their parents and by Rainbow Island's staff, the children were finally able to parade their costumes.

"They were gorgeous, and so happy," Mroue said. "After a week of hard work, the children

'After a week of hard work, the children saw their fantasies come to life'

saw their fantasies come to life. They became what they always wanted to be: Cinderellas, Snow Whites, princes, drummers, hippies, etc."

The competition for the best costume created a sense of responsibility inside the children, "as each one of them learned how to make efforts, to become the best," explained Hala Ha-

lawani, director of Rainbow Island's learning center. "This event is meant to be fun and educational at the same time."

Every child left Rainbow Island with a present at the end of the two-day competition.

"No heartbreaks!" Mroue added with a smile. "After all, it's a Rainbow Island!"

The children, divided into three age groups, were eager to compete in front of the jury.

"All of the 12 members of the jury have creative backgrounds, like acting or painting," said party coordinator Rima Francis.

As such, well-known Lebanese actors and artists like Talal Jurdi, Ziad Said, Naim Halawi, and Nazih Youssef were part of the jury.

"The jury members were as excited as the kids!" Francis added. "They encouraged each kid's creativity, and were never reluctant to sacrifice their whole afternoon on Friday and Saturday for the sake of the parade."

According to Mroue, the

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