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Saturday, July 17, 2010

**Summer program aims to steer youth away from crime**By **Simona Sikimic**

Daily Star staff

BEIRUT: Children from the most underprivileged backgrounds are at constant risk of being drawn into conflict, whether physical – crime or drugs – or social – in the form of begging or general delinquency.

Both forms are high among marginalized young people who lack access to education and aren't enrolled in schools. This risk becomes even higher during the summer when there is less structure, and when any programs the children may have been enrolled in come to an end.

A new program, "Protecting children from conflict," run by NGO Le Mouvement Social and funded by the European Commission, is now striving to keep young people aged 10–18 off the streets by providing them with civic lessons and anger management training at a time when they might otherwise be falling victim to crime.

In centers in Sin al-Fil, Jnah, Tripoli, Sidon and Zahle, where delinquency levels are high, Le Mouvement Social is conducting a two-week summer day course for 100 youngsters aged 10–14 and a further 60, aged 8-14.

"We're helping them overcome violence in their environment and turn negative energy into a positive one," said Imane Ajami, the head of Le Mouvement Social's Sin al-Fil center.

"They are drop-outs and their difficult economical situation affects their social life and their psychological side. This project is preventing children from becoming delinquents."

Lebanon's Higher Council of Childhood estimates that 25 percent of children drop out before getting to the 9th grade, deemed the legal mandatory schooling age.

These figures are even higher in deprived areas where Le Mouvement Social operates, and are further exasperated by social and economical problems such as violence, a lack of identity papers and family problems, explained Ajami.

Dropping out has life-long repercussions and makes it difficult for children to reintegrate into society at a later date.

"Our past experience has shown that if conflict erupts, these children are among the first to get embroiled in it," said Gisele Ashkar, Le Mouvement Social's communication officer.

"We try to teach them basic citizenship principles and we work with them to develop their personality and leadership skills so that they can go out and act as mentors to other children. The influence of fellow peers is a powerful tool, especially at that age."

Many of the children also come from different and traditionally hostile backgrounds. By bringing them together and teaching them the value of citizenship, the project hopes to bolster national unity and end sectarian strife.

While the summer school is important, crucially, its work is supplemented by a longer-term drive which runs throughout the year. "Protecting children from conflict," initiated last fall, with funding guaranteed until the end of 2011, also provides children age 10-14 with a basic level of education.

It works with them daily on their psychological development, as well as teaching them elementary accounting, while ensuring they obtain a working degree of literacy.

"Our first year consisted of working on the child's personality and personal skills; we took 'violence at

home' as a theme to help drive positive change in their minds and attitudes," said Ajami.

"The big improvement was to see them stop screaming at each other, to stop hitting each other and to begin listening and communicating with words."

"Protecting children from conflict" also runs a training-based approach for those aged 15-18 which teaches young adults technical skills that will help them to find employment instead of turning to crime.

Still in its infancy, the program will attract new recruits for the next academic year and will continue to expand on the limited progress achieved thus far.

"It's true that our work is not reaching a big number of children, because we do not have the means to do so," said Ajami. "Nevertheless our aim is to raise awareness and drive change in every child's family and environment while respecting it."

At the end of the summer program, the young people have a month off, before the commencement of the next academic year in August. It is hoped most will return and continue into the next academic year where additional emphasis will be placed on citizenship skills.

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