

Palestinian Camps in Beirut

In mid-October, a correspondent for *Democratic Palestine* visited the Palestinian refugee camps in the Beirut area. Here he spoke with a broad range of political activists, professionals, freedom fighters and ordinary residents of Shatila and Burj Al Barajneh camps. The following is excerpts from some of these interviews. It is noteworthy that since his visit, both these camps have been subject to renewed attacks by Amal's forces.

Shatila Still Besieged

Comrade Abu Samer, administrative officer of the PFLP in Shatila, is married and has eight children. He is from Dir Al Qassi in northern Palestine. He explained the situation in the camp: «We still live in a state of semi-siege. We have been asking our Syrian brothers to find a solution for that. Our children are afraid to go to school. Everybody is searched... We did not expect these wars with Amal. We fought together and considered ourselves allies before the first camp war in May 1985. Amal started harassing our people. Then suddenly, they started the war. We used the loudspeakers of the mosque to ask them to stop, but Amal was fulfilling a Zionist-imperialist plan. This first war lasted until the Damascus agreement was concluded (in June 1985).»

«There was calm for two months. Then Amal started throwing grenades at the camp intermittently, and harassment of our people outside the camp increased. There was a battle of six hours, and we defeated Amal and controlled their positions. Then we withdrew to our own positions on the orders of our political leadership. That was in October 1985. Then, in December 1985, there was the war of four days. In February 1986, there was the war of 20 days. Then there was the 45 day war in June 1986.»

FRONTLINE DEFENSE

We interviewed the fighters in a PFLP military position that is on the frontline in the defense of Shatila camp. Comrade Abu Athab explained, «I have been involved in all the battles to defend Shatila since 1985. In 1985, I fought from outside the camp, because I could not enter. After that, I moved to the camp. The camp wars are a direct service to 'Israel', because they aim to rob our people of their arms. Regardless of the pressure on us, we will never give up our weapons.»

Comparing the military situation now with the first battle with Amal in 1985, Comrade Abu Athab said, «Before and just after the first battle, our situation was desperate, because we were not prepared to fight Amal. We did not have enough arms or ammunition. There were not enough military cadres to lead the defense. Now the situation is much better. We even have

a medical staff. In the first battle, the fighting was all in the camp itself, but in the following battles, we advanced to a certain extent, so the fighting would not take place in the camp.»

Comrade Samir Harb, leader of the position, said, «I am proud to say I am a fighter with the PFLP, because it is a revolutionary organization that honors the Palestinian cause and armed struggle... We realize that Amal is carrying out a plan to take away the arms of the Palestinian masses. The Amal leadership is divided into two main factions. One is misled by the idea of building a sectarian, purely Shiite canton. The other is directly tied to Zionism and its state. The second faction is more influential in the South. The main body of Amal is nationalist, but is misled by these two factions...»

Comrade Samir explained the main lessons gained in these battles as follows: «The first lesson was fighting in hand-to-hand combat. At times, the only distance between us and Amal was a brick wall. I learned that I can fight anyone face-to-face to defend our revolution. The other lesson concerned developing special relations with the masses during a state of siege. Our steadfastness cannot be separated from the steadfastness of our masses. Our masses played a vital role in supporting the fighters. The women used pillow cases to transport sand for defense lines, and they helped transport food, water and ammunition.»

Comrade Samir explained how they had controlled their position in the first place: «Before the 20 days battle (February 1986), we were not here. Then there was a political decision that this area is part of the camp's defense. This area consists of three passageways through which the Amal gangs were able to direct fire at the center of the camp. We were able to defeat Amal here and take control of the area in order to protect our people.»

Comrade Abu Athab was injured in the fighting with Amal, and we asked if he bore hard feelings against the Shiites. He replied, «For forty years, we have lived alongside Lebanese Shiites with no problems. We intermarried. We consider them brothers. For this reason, I have a strong hatred of those elements who serve 'Israel' by trying to create antagonism between the Palestinians and Lebanon's Shiites.»

Concerning future battles, he said, «We are going to adopt much more severe tactics if Amal strikes again, regardless of their excuse. We are not going to limit ourselves to responding. We will implement the agreement by force and we have the power to do it. We will not allow any force to rob us of our arms.»

Comrade Abu Athab described the relations between the fighters and the masses: «Our masses are our source of moral support during the battle. They become fighters too by participating in the militias. We in the resistance were ready for battle and had food stocks for three meals a day, while the masses faced shortages. So we helped out. By the end of the battle, we ate only two, sometimes one meal a day. That had no effect on our steadfastness. We are used to this because we have had the experience of previous occasions. In conclusion, he stressed, «I would like to salute all progressive fighters around the world who struggle against imperialism. I call on the Palestinian leaders to reunite the PLO on a nationalist basis, as has been proposed by the PFLP. I hope that our comrades abroad will increase their support for us by all means possible.»

POPULAR COMMITTEE

Mr. Darwish is a member of the popular committee of Shatila camp. He is from Akbara near Safad in northern Palestine, and has nine children. He gave an idea of the popular committee's aims and activities: «The popular committee was established in 1973, in accordance with a PLO decision... Since the establishment, our aim has been the same, i.e., serving the masses and acting as the executive and political apparatus in the daily life of the camp. The popular committee is divided into different committees for external relations, internal relations, social affairs, finances, information, public services and projects. Every committee has its duties. The project committee is responsible for accomplishing specific projects, such as water and electricity. Recently, two wells were dug in the camp, and the water is good. Electric lines were set up, and the sewage system was repaired. We brought two electricity generators. We also manage several bakeries and cooperatives.»

«The public service committee is responsible for garbage collection and clearing away the rubble after wars. The social committee is responsible for