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81 Palestinian children arrive for month-long visit

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - A group of 81 Palestinian children from war-torn Lebanon arrived here today for a one-month visit.

They were greeted at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport by the National Unity and Social Development Minister Datin Paduka Zaleha Ismail who later spent some time with them at the Holiday Inn on the Park hotel.

The visit by the children of the Bait Atfal As Samoud (Home of the Steadfast Children) was organised by the Malaysian Sociological Research Institute with the co-operation of State Welfare Departments.

During their stay here, the children, from four to 19 years' old, will have an educational tour of Perak, Kedah, Sabah, Selangor and the Federal Territory.

They are also scheduled to have a dinner next Friday with the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. They will also visit their Malaysian "foster parents" who have been sponsoring their education and upbringing through the MSRI.

So far 388 Palestinian children had been adopted here through the MSRI.

At the hotel, children expressed their joy by singing the Malay song "Geylang Sepaku Geylang" which they had been practising prior to the visit.

One of the children, Dareen Issa, 15, who stayed in the Ain Al Helwa Refugee Camp in Saida, Lebanon, with her grandparents after her parents death, said she was delighted to meet with her "foster parents" here.

Mariam Azzouka, 13, said her apprehension of being in a new place was quickly dispelled as she found that Malaysians were very caring and the country was very peaceful.

Mariam, who lives in the infamous Shatila Refugee Camp in Beirut where thousands of Palestinians were massacred during the Israeli invasion in 1982, said life in Lebanon is now bearable.

"I go to school like everybody else," said Mariam, who aspired to be a doctor.

According to the group's liaison officer, Hanan Masri, the number of Palestinian children dropping out of schools in Lebanon was increasing rapidly due to the deteriorating economic situation.

Hanan added that the fate of Palestinians in the refugee camps in Lebanon had taken a turn for the worst since the Oslo Peace Agreement was signed in September 1993.

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