



The Friends of Waldorf Education Forced to Leave Gaza

EL ARISH, Egypt (NNA) A crisis intervention team sent to Gaza by the international Waldorf organization, The Friends of Waldorf Education, to help traumatized children has been forced to leave the territory again on the urgent advice of the UN and the German foreign office.

The advice to foreign delegations to leave Gaza was issued because Egypt said it would close the Rafah crossing point into the territory on Thursday and that thereafter they would no longer be allowed to cross back into Egypt. The Friends of Waldorf Education said the 15-member team, consisting of anthroposophical physicians, therapists, and health and education professionals with experience in crisis intervention work, left Gaza on Wednesday and is now waiting in the Egyptian town of El Arish to return.

Because of its decades-long experience in helping children in war zones or in the wake of natural disasters most recently in Lebanon in 2006/2007 and the earthquake in China last year, The Friends of Waldorf Education decided to send the intervention team to Gaza to provide acute assistance to children and their families traumatized by the recent fighting.

According to UN figures from the end of January, some 1,300 Palestinians were killed and more than 5,300 were injured, 34 per cent of them children. Israel's three-week military offensive also caused widespread damage and destruction. Numerous children who came under fire have been psychologically traumatized and require urgent help to prevent or reduce the psychological after-effects such as post-traumatic stress, The Friends of Waldorf Education says. The organization stresses that the current crisis intervention is motivated purely on humanitarian grounds and was coordinated with the Israeli Waldorf school movement. The action was organized with the assistance of the German foreign office which contacted the Egyptian and Israeli authorities.

Waldorf education and the various anthroposophical forms of therapy were particularly suited for this purpose, the organization adds. Teachers would also be supported to prepare them for dealing with the children in school.

Until Wednesday, one part of the team was working in southern Gaza and the other in the northern part of the territory. Friends of Waldorf Education said the deployment was organized with "our cooperation partner", the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme (GCMHP), a large Palestinian umbrella organization which works both with Physicians for Human Rights in Israel and the World Health Organisation (WHO). If the emergency team is not allowed to return to Gaza, it will seek to get permission to work with the children in the refugee camps situated in Egypt on the border with the Palestinian territory.