

# JCC DSPR MECC CONTINUES TO HELP BEIRUT DISASTER ZONE RESIDENTS

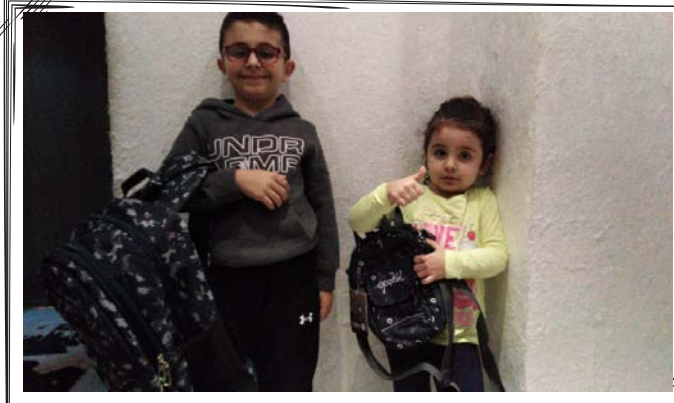


The small open pickup truck, laden with large boxes, made its way cautiously down Alexander Fleming street, an offshoot alley from the Mar Mikhael road, and just a few minutes walking distance from the Beirut port. „Hello! Hello” Norma Irani warmly greeted JCC worker Elias Habib. „And you brought my new gas stove!” Irani, somewhere in her early sixties, was practically jumping with excitement. „I don’t know how to thank you,” she said, smiling broadly, „come up, come up.” Hauling a big box on his back, the pickup driver carefully made his way to her third floor flat.

Habib met Irani in August right after a large amount of ammonium nitrate, stored at Beirut’s port, exploded and killed almost two hundred people, wounded thousands, and left over 300,000 people homeless. Irani’s flat was destroyed, and she had sought the cleanup help of JCC, housed in temporary headquarters in a destroyed restaurant on Mar Mikhael street. At the time, Habib headed twenty Palestinian teenagers from Dbayeh camp who spent three months immersed in the cleanup efforts of the area.



The JCC group cleared over 600 homes of mountains of glass and wood debris, carrying hundreds of heavy sacs down countless floors. JCC simultaneously surveyed the households visited to assess urgent needs. Parents had then asked JCC to procure for their children some toys to soothe the loss of treasured toys and games blasted away in the explosion. And as schools had started, they also asked for some much-needed stationery.



„We weren't always this poor," explained one mother shyly. „A year ago, we would have been able to buy our children's things ourselves and not ask for your help. But everything is so different now." This is, sadly, the new Lebanon. A country sinking under an unprecedented dire economic crisis, a currency that has lost almost 80% of its value, and hyperinflation prices for necessities. The pandemic served to ignite the further collapse of the Lebanese economy. For those still lucky enough to have jobs, salaries have dwindled to a few meager dollars – barely enough to cover food, let alone buy other goods. Thanks to donors, JCC was able to procure gift cards for many of the children in the disaster area. Overjoyed youngsters headed to the stationery shop and chose new toys, pencils, pens, notebooks, erasers, and odds and ends of school supplies. The adults also received precious gifts: coupons to be used for food and household items at the local supermarket. The gratitude was overwhelming.



Now was the JCC's latest project: appliances. Many families had been living without the necessary large household appliances – most notably, gas stoves, heaters, washing machines, and fridges. It was the same story. These once relatively affluent families had no means of buying them. They again turned to JCC.

And so it was that JCC began delivering appliances to 60 families who were deemed to need it the most. Habib left Irani excitedly examining her new gas stove and checked his list.





Next was Joseph Ghrayeb. His flat, nestled in a turn of the century-old building with arched windows and a red-tiled roof, was severely damaged. Ghrayeb had requested a washing machine. His elderly mother could barely see, and washing by hand had become a trial. Again, the pickup driver hauled a box on his back and climbed the three flights of stairs. The machine was delivered.

As Habib returned to the street to check his delivery list, a man came up to him. „Do you provide televisions?“ he asked. „No,“ replied Habib. „I am afraid not.“ The man was visibly upset. „Please come to my home,“ he said.

Habib obliged. An elderly woman clad in black smiled sweetly as the men entered the flat. It was an Armenian family. Rafi Tossonian, 45, pointed to a television screen on the table. „It doesn't work,“ he said. „And we can't buy one.“ Next to the nonfunctioning TV was a metal watch perfectly split into two halves. Tossonian grabbed it and displayed it to Habib.

„My father was wearing this when the explosion happened,“ he said. „That's all I have left of him.“ On August 4 at 5:45 pm, his 85-year-old left the family tailor shop and headed home. His wife and son were to follow soon. 6:07 pm. The neighborhood shook violently. Blood-soaked and shock-shelled people emerged into the streets. Tossonian ran home. His bloodied father was lying on the floor of the apartment with hundreds of glass shards protruding from his body. Hence the sliced metal watch. „Please, do you have a television for us?“ Tossonian asked quietly. „Let me see what I can do,“ answered Habib. Tossonian nodded gratefully.



Outside, Habib sighed heavily. He has been heading JCC work in the disaster area from day one. He has seen it all. The damage, the tears, the defeat, the helplessness. „There is so much need,“ he said, frustrated. „We can't help everybody. How can we?“ He was silent for a few seconds. „There is nothing worse than turning away people who need you,“ he said. „But we can only give as much as we are given. That's just the way it is.“ Habib turned back to the van. The exhausted pickup driver was looking over the boxes. Three more deliveries today. Tomorrow, they will start again.

Our gratitude goes to **ACT ALLIANCE, PRESBYTERIAN WORLD SERVICE, UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA, THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST), CHRISTIAN WORLD SERVICE, PRIMATE WORLD RELIEF & DEVELOPMENT FUND, UMCOR AND CHURCH OF FINLAND** for their allowing us to give some happiness to some of the families devastated by the Beirut Explosion.

Thanks to the writer of this article Reem Haddad