

News & Updates

Forum warns of housing crisis in Jerusalem

by Sumana Ramanan

More than 2,000 new housing units need to be built each year in East Jerusalem to house the growing number of Palestinians, according to a study carried out by the PNA Ministry of Housing.

The study "Housing in Jerusalem, Past, Present and Future," was presented at an international conference on Affordable Housing in Palestine at Birzeit University, which concluded Sunday, November 3.

The study indicates that there will be 250,000 Palestinians in Jerusalem by the year 2010. In order to house this population at a ratio of five persons per housing unit, 30,000 more units will have to be constructed by then. The ministry also estimates that there will be a shortage of about 200,000 units over the whole self-rule territories.

"In the past 27 years," noted Abdel Mughni Nofal, one of the conference delegates, "varying methods of land seizure, the annexation of Jerusalem, the expropriation of land and other military orders, coupled with severe restrictions on land use have had a severe impact on the housing sector. Meeting the hous-

ing shortage is one of the most important challenges in Palestine, especially for low income people."

In order to meet this shortage, the conference delegates concluded, the PNA should develop a housing strategy for Jerusalem that would plan for both rapid, new construction as well as for the upgrading of old structures. The hallmark of such a strategy should be high-density low rise construction. The strategy should specify the role of Palestinian financial and legal institutions in this project. While the PNA would lay the policy guidelines for construction, the conference acknowledged the importance of the private sector.

"The instability and uncertainty that characterize the Palestinian economy make the recovery of the principal amount of housing mortgage and periodic interest extremely difficult," explained Kamal Naser, from the University of Cardiff. "Hence, creative measures ought to be developed to ensure credit recovery."

Construction will not only meet the housing shortage but also be a source of employment, according to Umberto Triulzi from the University of La Spienza, Rome.

"Housing construction is a sector where a large part of the local

labor force can be employed," he said.

Dena Assaf of the University of Washington noted the importance of maintaining a Palestinian identity in any development project. Assaf was one of the few delegates to place the question of housing in the broader context of Palestinian self-determination. "Housing that does not acknowledge Palestinian aspirations will be viewed as temporary housing, and this would be a waste of funds," she said.

No strategy for housing in Palestine can overlook the refugee camps, whose sanitation and safety levels are abysmal. Besides a cursory call to "improve living conditions in refugee camps till their inhabitants achieve legal rights", the conference did not throw much light on the issue. If there was a serious lacuna in the conference, this was it.

"People from Gaza and other parts of the West Bank could not attend the conference because of the present internal closure imposed by the Israelis," said Hani Nigim, chairman of the conference and dean of Birzeit's Engineering Department.

"But despite this odd situation, the conference was very successful," he said.