

Lebanese woman, children starting 'new life' in Texas

Associated Press

SHERMAN — It's difficult to imagine living through a bloody civil war like the one raging in Lebanon. Americans are used to reading newspapers and seeing video images of war and death in other countries, but somehow it never touches home.

But to someone who has lived there during 10 years of hell, it is all too real.

"I came here because there is no life in Beirut," says Maha Allameh, who was born in Beirut. "Three-quarters of our life is spent in shelters, escaping the bombs. It's a miserable life in Beirut. It's no life."

At 28, Allameh came to Sherman with her children to see "if there is a possibility of starting a new life in the United States." Her husband remained in Beirut, where he maintains equipment in an all-too-busy Beirut hospital.

"When I came here, there was so much fighting, there was no one to replace him," she explains.

As her children, 4-year-old Naim (whose name means Glory) and 3-year-old Farah (Joy) watched cartoons, Allameh spoke of life in Beirut, and life here.

"The first thing my children asked about (when we arrived in Sherman) is 'Where's the shelter?' and I told them 'They don't use shelters here — It's a different country.'"

The civil war in Lebanon began

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— Maha Allameh, a Lebanese immigrant.

in earnest in 1975 and has focused on Beirut, the country's capital and former "Paris of the Middle East." The fighting now is mainly between rival religious factions, she says, each afraid of losing political power, or being persecuted for religious reasons.

"The strange thing about it is people get used to the war," the former stewardess and bank clerk said. "They'd spend all night in the shelter hearing bombs, and get up the next morning and dress and go to work."

She has been living in Sherman with her brother and sister-in-law, both U.S. citizens, in a quiet home on a quiet block with a quiet school just down the street.

In Beirut, it's different. "We live right next to the border," or Green Line, that divides Moslem West and Christian East

Beirut," she said. "We're in the middle, near the airport. It's mostly a Shi'ite (a Moslem sect) area, and Christians don't like Shi'ites, so they keep bombing the area."

"My kids have spent most of their lives in shelters. We're almost always sleeping in the shelter. If there's nothing (no bombs), we sleep at home, and in the middle of the night hell would break out, and we'd be on our nerves until morning."

One problem facing Allameh if she decides to move to the U.S. is the wait for a work visa. The earliest she could obtain a green card, according to Immigration officials, is four years from now.

Yet she still hopes to bring her family to America. Her sister-in-law, Mary Newman Said, explained why many Lebanese hope to come to the U.S., despite the wait.

"When my husband and I were in Beirut, people would ask us about America, and get this look on their faces like 'Oh, America! That's the promised land,'" she said.

Yet most stay in Beirut, lacking the money, green card, or will, to leave their home.

"It's a very hard thing, just to give up and start a new life" in a foreign country, Allameh said, noting how family and culturally oriented the Lebanese people are.

Aggies from Lebanon keep sense of unity

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her return to the United States for a few days.

Hamade says the Lebanese at A&M share a love for their country. She says they also find a common bond in that they all feel homesick for their country.

She adds that she thinks it will be a long time before the situation in Lebanon is resolved.

"I don't have any hope for Lebanon right now," Hamade says. "Even if the war ends, you still have the system messed up."

Roula Freiha, secretary-treasurer of the LSA, says group members find a common bond in that it is easier to relate to others facing the same situation.

"The way I feel since I'm out of Lebanon is that I feel closer to those who are also out of Lebanon because there are so few of us," Freiha says. "When we come together we feel almost like we're home because we share the same culture."

Freiha, whose family moved from Beirut to Houston four years ago, also says the bond between the Leb-

anese students here is strong enough that a change of setting would not break it.

"Even if we were in Lebanon I think we would still all be friends," she says.

Ziad Tassabehji, vice president of the LSA, says the Lebanese students here are drawn together through common feelings they share.

"Everyone feels the same," he says. "They miss their country and their friends."

Tassabehji also says the tensions abroad do not carry over to the Lebanese on campus.

"Here, you kind of forget those problems," he says, "because you're not exactly in contact with all the problems."

"You have enough other problems over here like getting your money on time and making your grades."

"One important thing is that educated people are usually less interested in politics."

He says the people fighting in the streets of Lebanon are not among

the country's more educated.

The plans for life after A&M vary among the Lebanese students.

Freiha says she would like to go back to Lebanon when everything gets back to normal.

Khalil says, "I plan to go back no matter what."

Hamade says she enjoys the opportunities available in the United States and is unsure about returning to Lebanon anytime in the near future.

Tassabehji says the Lebanese want to rebuild their country.

"We would like to go back to Lebanon one day and try to make things better and help as much as we can in the way we can," he says.

Fares echoes those sentiments.

"We're trying to show that Lebanon is a good country," he says. "It's nothing like the media show it to be."

"Our generation's main goal is to go back to Lebanon and rebuild it and make it a better place."

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