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Palestinian girls nab science prize in Silicon Valley, praise at UN headquarters



Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon with students from UNRWA school

18 May 2010 – Three Palestinian girls educated in a United Nations-funded school in a refugee camp have made history by winning a top spot at an international science fair in Silicon Valley for a revolutionary walking cane for the blind which they demonstrated today for Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in New York.

“This is a story about brain power not fire power. You are not only helping the blind, but helping the world to see,” Mr. Ban told the girls during their meeting today at UN Headquarters.

“I am very impressed by your brilliant idea. This is the truth that I repeat every day. By empowering women, we can achieve anything in the world,” the Secretary-General added.

Aseel Abu Aleil, Aseel Alshaar and Noor Alarada earned the “special award in applied electronics” out of 1,500 finalists in last week’s Intel International Science and Engineering Fair, considered the largest pre-college science fair in the world, bringing together “young geniuses” as the Secretary-General called the girls, Nobel Laureates, and other leading scientific thinkers and future employers.

The three 14-year-old girls attend the school run by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East ([UNRWA](#)) in Aska Refugee Camp in Nablus, north of Jerusalem, where they designed the prototype walking cane as a school science project with \$200 worth of materials.

Unlike other electronic canes that send an infrared signal forward, the girls' invention has a "seeing" sensor below that beeps when the surface changes, such as near stairs, holes or water, up to 30 inches away.

"How does it make sound?" the Secretary-General asked trying out the walking stick – a three-foot hollow piece of wood with a comfortable handle, covered with reflective orange strips, and wired inside with a sensor.

Mr. Ban brought the cane near the door – it beeped. He then ran the bottom of the cane against his board room table. At the edge, the cane beeped indicating there was no ground below it.

The girls came up with the idea after watching their relatives struggle on the changing terrain in the refugee camp. It was then perfected with input from organizations that work with visually impaired people, and from the girls' science and technology teacher, Jamilah Khaled.

"The UNRWA schools have a high level of teaching," Ms. Khaled told the UN News Centre, listing its modern computer lab and technology workshop, as just two of the resources which help students excel.

"It is important for our society to help people. It is important for Palestinian refugees to continue to learn."

The girls' invention was selected as one of three finalists from among 56 projects at the Palestine Science and Technology Exhibition to participate at the Intel ISEF.

"These students show the enormous potential of Palestinian girls and boys. UNRWA in its education programmes want to bring this out. It makes me wonder what we could achieve if our education system were not in the midst of a cash crisis," said Margot Ellis, UNRWA Deputy Commissioner-General.

The girls return to the West Bank later today, each with a \$250 prize, and they plan to "have a big party," eat Palestinian food, see their parents and sleep, following a whirlwind nine-day visit to the United States, that included seeing the Statue of Liberty and Times Square in New York.

"This has been so unbelievable," Ms. Alshaar said following the meeting with the Secretary-General.

"Wonderful," said Ms. Khaled.

"Amazing," said Ms. Aleil.

"We are so grateful to everyone for helping us," said Ms. Alshaar showing the walking stick to journalists.

Moments later, the international science award winners were back to being regular teenagers, taking photos of themselves with the artwork on exhibit at the UN Headquarters and telling one of the journalists where they like to go shopping.

As of now, there are no plans to mass produce the walking stick, but the girls would like to see that happen and to continue their science education. Ms. Alshaar plans to be a genetic engineer; Ms. Alarada a cancer researcher and Ms. Aleil a professor of medicine.

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