

[Home](#) > [Newsroom](#) > IMC Marathon Brings Joy to Children in Former Conflict Zone

IMC Marathon Brings Joy to Children in Former Conflict Zone

April 05, 2007, by Julie Poucher Harbin

A spirited mini-marathon, organized for children attending an IMC-supported safe play space in the southern Lebanese village of Braachit, brought some early springtime fun to the community and sought to raise awareness about children's health.

On March 2, thirty boys, age 10-13, raced through the village with ten boys from a safe play space in Bent Jbeil, which is supported by Intersos, an Italian NGO. More than 1,000 children attend seven IMC-organized safe play spaces throughout Southern Lebanon, a program initiated in September 2006 following the conflict between Israel and Lebanon.

IMC's child-friendly spaces volunteer coordinator in Braachit, Ali Farhat, organized the marathon, which started at a local school where the child-friendly space is housed, and looped 500 meters through the village and back to the school. The IMC team sported IMC T-shirts with health slogans printed in Arabic on the back: "Mama please don't smoke, it hurts"; "Mama please don't forget vaccinations because it's very important"; an, "In order to have clean teeth, I should brush every day". Townspeople going about their daily business looked on amused at the flash of children dashing by, while friends of the participants cheered them on.

Braachit was badly affected by the conflict between Israel and Lebanon. More than 5,000 local people – well over half of all the families living in the village – were internally displaced, and a fifth of the homes in the village were destroyed. IMC opened a child-friendly space in this rural town, home to both Muslims and Christians, in January.

Ali Awadi, administrative officer for IMC Lebanon's psychosocial department, said while the children were used to doing running exercises, they had never experienced an organized running competition before.

"The marathon was something new for the children, and they showed lots of appreciation for it. I think they were pleased to have someone caring about them. When they wore the T-shirts they felt they belonged to something."

Thirteen-year-old Mohamed, who came in second place at the marathon, said he owed his win to the program.

"I came in second in the marathon because I always train within the CFS outdoor program," says Mohamed. "I run, I play football . . . The program is encouraging me to get more involved in sports."

During the conflict last August, Mohamed and his family left Braachit and moved temporarily to Beirut.

"When we came back, our house was destroyed," he says. "I spent lots of time alone or with my friends on the street. Now, things have changed. I've made new friends, I play sports. I never want the program to stop."

Hussein, a ten-year-old boy with a buzz cut and a boisterous personality, expressed gratitude for the relief he has found through the activities of IMC's child-friendly spaces program.

"I was unhappy when I returned home after the war because my house was not beautiful," he says. "I was scared, scared to sleep alone. Now I play, I ride my bike. I feel happy."



PHOTO: Julie Poucher Harbin

Ali Awadi, administrative officer for IMC's psychosocial department in Lebanon, presents a medal to the marathon's third-place winner. Photo by Julie Poucher Harbin.



PHOTO: Julie Poucher Harbin

Ali Awadi, left, poses with a triumphant Mohamad, who won second place in the marathon. Photo by Julie Poucher Harbin.

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- Mental Health

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Press Contact

Stephanie Bowen sbowen@imcworldwide.org 310-826-7800

IMC Headquarters

1919 Santa Monica Blvd. Suite 400, Santa Monica, CA 90404

T. 310.826.7800 F. 310.442.6622

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