

They were born in hiding during the Algerian Civil War

The children prohibited... from school!

- In Bougara, Ouled Slama and in other regions, there are still children not admitted to... schools! Their sole fault is that their father, or sometimes both parents, participated in the underground armed groups. Outcome – they have no legal existence.
- Promises of the Ministry of National Education to take charge of these children in terms of their education and even of their social status – by facilitating administrative steps in order to admit them to schools – have not in fact been kept. Nothing has changed for the families concerned. Not a single ministerial notice has been sent to school principals to accept these children.
- Some of these principals humanely decide to accept these children, but later they cannot pass their final primary school exam as they do not have the required administrative documents.
- Officials and lawyers' hands are tied because they have no legal foundations to help these children. Lawyers' collective claim to encounter difficulties in regularizing their cases. As for the officials, they limit themselves, in the absence of a precise article in the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, to applying articles relating to affiliation of the Family Code. For them, the Charter has well and truly omitted this category of children.

By Nassima Oulebsir

Monday, September 10th. It almost noon when we arrive at Rmili district on the outskirts of Bougara, known as the prohibited zone during the Algerian Civil War. The district was prohibited for all strangers, security forces included. Today these are the children from this district who are "prohibited" from schools.

We are here to meet them. Why are they prohibited from schools? Because they were born in the underground or in the absence of their father who was a member of the armed groups. Although several cases have already been regularized, others are awaiting their turn. These children are not inscribed in the registry office, hence they do not have legal existence. Sometimes even their parents' marriage was illegal, as a result of counterfeit documents issued by some state agents cooperating with the armed groups.

When school becomes a... dream

These children are classified as victims of the national tragedy, but the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation does not mention their case in any of its articles. Today, these children, far from any political and social consideration, go through hell in order to be admitted to schools, one of the fundamental rights established by the Constitution and international conventions on human rights. At that rate, their social integration does not seem to be in near future. Therefore, no legal existence – no school.

As a result of talking to the mothers and some of these children, it turns out that, in fact, none of the decisions of the Ministry of National Education has been applied. They have been granted no administrative facilitations, as announced last May by minister Benbouzid. No birth certificate – no school. And there is no point in negotiating with school principals, unless they are personal acquaintance. 'But your child has been admitted to school, with no legal existence?' we asked one of the mothers. 'The principal knows well the Bnat Fatma Nsoumer collective.

It is thanks to the women of this association that the principal has accepted my child to school,' says the woman.

Waiting for the decisions of the law to regularize their situation, some families resort to their acquaintances in order to educate their children. 'The principal is from my village,' another mother tells us.

Life does not always look that *bright* for other families. For, not all principals disobey the law. Others respect this law even at the expense of their children. 'They cannot risk their post,' says Mme Kezal, president of the Bnat Fatma Nsoumer collective.

However, the admission to school *without documents* does not end the nightmare in any way. When the pupil is in the exam year (former 6th grade), he or she is automatically... excluded! They cannot take this exam as they are not registered in the National Students' Record in the Ministry of Education.

Empty promises of the Ministry of Education

Amel, today 11 year-old girl, was born when her father was in the underground and wanted by the security forces. She knew neither her father nor her paternal or maternal uncles. They were all militants in armed groups. Her parents got married in 1994. 'My husband took a few days' leave in order to organize the wedding. I knew that he was in the underground,' says her mother, Fatiha. Hardly 31 years old, the young mother tries every day to make peace with herself by saying that it is her destiny, *el maktoub*. With a bit of remorse and a lot of grief, the mother continues: 'We organized the most regular wedding ceremony possible. There was an imam to read the fatiha and we even registered our marriage in the registry office.' This young mother, who received us at her parents' house where she now lives, believed that she most definitely had a marriage certificate. The surprise came years later when she found out that the certificate was... forged!

'I had no reason to doubt whether my marriage could be illegal as I had my family record book.'

'How is it possible that the marriage was illegal?'

'It is simple. State officials in this region were almost dependent on the armed groups. There was an agent cooperating with these groups permanently and he was in charge of all measures connected with marriage, by means of a seal, also forged, at his disposal.'

'What does it mean?'

'I will give you my husband's example. It was impossible to declare his marriage officially as he was wanted by the security forces. And such was the fate of other wanted men who wished to get married.'

Fatiha claims that she was unaware of all these practices. She became aware of them only later. 'I had my family record book. Besides, I had no problem being admitted to hospital when I was giving birth in 1996.'

'Were you with your husband at the time?'

'No. He died in 1995. I was pregnant then. All in all, I only spent one year with him.'

'How did you find out?'

'It was my brother who buried him. He was also a member of the armed groups.'

Once her husband died, a real nightmare began for the young mother, Fatiha. Without a legal family record book it was difficult to register her daughter in the registry office. Although she got married in 1994, it was only in 2001 that she could get an authentic family record book.

Before she could continue, we allowed ourselves to interrupt her so that she paid more attention to her words in the presence of Amel, too young to worry about adults' problems. The woman laughs:

'Don't worry. She knows about everything, just like her cousins and neighbours who are in the same situation.'

'So, it is not a family secret?'

'No, not at all. The entire district is in the same situation. The majority of men were in the underground and now all the women that you can see there are widows.'

Fatiha continues her story in the presence of her mother, who does not stop shaking her head to emphasize her grief. The young mother proudly tells us that she managed to solve the problem of her daughter's legal existence a few days before the beginning of the school year. Otherwise, Amel would have shared the nightmare of hundreds of children for whom school has become a dream, because of their parents. 'Thank God, my daughter, contrary to my nephews and other neighbours, miraculously escaped the non-education,' she says. 'I want her to continue her education,' she adds. During four long years, her days were limited to wandering between the APC (town hall) and the courts so that her daughter was admitted to school in time. The mother regained hope after promulgation of the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation that her daughter, in the fourth grade now, could profit from

psychological help. 'She forgets a lot of things and she does not focus enough on the lessons. It bothers me and I think that, psychologically, she is affected by what I had endured and what she is also enduring,' admits the woman and expresses the regret that her daughter is not taken care of by a psychologist at school. Out of all steps announced since 2005 by the Ministry of Solidarity and National Education in favour of these children, this mother does not get but the school allowance amounting to 2000 dinars, as all the other children deprived of education!

Fatiha is thankful to God: 'Hamdullah, it's better than nothing .' Free books, school uniforms, etc. This family got nothing. It is thanks to the Bnat Fatma Nsoumer collective, extremely active in the districts of Bougara, that some families can survive.

'How did you manage to cope when your husband was in the underground?'

She hesitates but finally answers:

'We always received money from the armed group. It came regularly. We were never in need. But later...'

Amel and others

Amel lives today thanks to the help of benefactors. It was impossible to make her say even a few words. Very suspicious and shy, the girl does not answer our questions. She does not even say her name. It's her cousin, Zhor, who doesn't know her father either, that sometimes answers instead of Amel. She says that she is in the wrong grade. Amel retorts in anger: 'We've got a bad teacher, all he does is hit us.'

Taking advantage of her anger, we insist on asking more questions. Amel refuses categorically: 'Why do you ask all these questions? To publish them in a newspaper?'

The girls, Amel, Zhor and Nardjess, all orphans by their fathers dead in the underground, are treated like adults. No low neckline, no short clothes. One of them wears a scarf permanently at home. 'Are you already wearing the hidjab?' 'No, not yet, but I got used to wearing this scarf,' says Zhor. The other girl is wearing severe clothes, a long shirt and large trousers.

Zhor and Nardjess are cousins. They also live with the old Zineb, their maternal grandmother, mother of Fatiha. Zineb seems very moved by her own and her daughters' fate. All her grandsons and granddaughters are orphans.

In all, she has three daughters and one son. The daughters all lost their husbands in the underground and her only son, once he had joined the armed group in 1994, disappeared with his wife in 1997. The couple left Abdellah and Fatima behind. Fatima also lives at her paternal grandmother's.

If Amel was lucky to be regularized in the registry office before the age of schooling, her cousin Abdellah and his sister weren't admitted to school until after they were 6!

These two children didn't know their father. The boy was hardly 40 days old and the girl was two years old when their parents disappeared. This year, the boy is admitted to the fifth grade.

Leave quickly, the inspector is coming

Many children like Nardjess, Amel and Abdellah are in the same situation. Official statistics enumerate 600 cases, according to Djamel Ould-Abbès, minister of National Solidarity. But for the collective, each case is a tragedy.

The minister committed himself, during one of his public appearances, to take charge of these children born in the underground on the psychological and educational levels, even after their inscription to schools. When we tried to verify these promises in practice, some families seemed surprised. 'Well, we got nothing,' they say. Could this be true? This is the stance of the families and even of the Bnat Fatma Nsoumer collective.

In practice, if these children are being schooled, thanks to the exceptional kindness of a few school principals, they are sometimes asked not to come to school against their will. In fact, teachers or the principal tell them not to come to class in case there is an inspection. For these children, lessons become almost a *sin*. 'Even if the principal helps the children, the inspector cannot suspect any irregularity. Therefore, the pupil cannot stay in class,' we are told by the collective. If the students manage to overcome all these obstacles during the school year, they are, after all these efforts, prohibited from the final primary school exam, because they have no administrative documents.