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Light on Palestinian plight: refugees in their own land

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The San Francisco International Film Festival is featuring two films about Palestinians that bring into sharp relief the interminable fear and humiliation of living as displaced refugees in their own land.

Aqabat Jaber, a searing documentary, penetrates deeply into the lives of people, some of whom have lived in this refugee camp near Jericho on the occupied West Bank for as long as 40 years. Some still hope that one-day they will return to their own villages.

The "temporary" camp, set up in the abandoned village of Aqabat Jaber in 1948 by the UNRWA (United Nations Relief Workers Agency), originally held 65,000 people from 116 ravaged villages. Since they have scattered to other camps, it now holds some 3,000 men, women and children in a state of suspended animation _housed in mud butts, seriously short of water in the blazing summer, periodically short of food. Only those who have given up hope of leaving venture to build more permanent housing.

"We plant trees," said one young father, "not to star but to give shade and fruit to our children." The mukhtar, elderly leader of the village, longs to return to the village of his childhood to die. "The word 'refugee' gives me great pain," says another landless farmer.

The need for one's land is as basic as hunger, one Arab farmer tells the filmmaker. His land had been called by the Israelis, as they appropriated it, "a land without a people for a people without a land."

In the refugee camp, "monkeys and demons would refuse to settle," says the farmer. A Bedouin, whose family continue to live in their tents, describes the struggle to keep their cattle and maintain their traditional ways under the restrictions of Israeli occupation, their pasturage having been taken away. The great documentary photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson was so moved by the film he lent his name and formidable reputation to its promotion.

AQABAT JABER: PASSING THROUGH (Vie de Passage), France. Screenplay, director, Eyal Sivan; producer, Thibaut de Corday; camera, Nurith Aviv, Raymond Grosjean. A Dune Vision film. At AMC Kabuki Cinema, 1881 Post St., San Francisco, Tuesday, March 22, 9:15 p.m., and Wednesday, March 23, 5 p.m.