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Spanish UNIFIL troops look to leave linguistic legacy

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Snapshot / by Theodore May

WAZZANI: Amidst the "moos" emanating from the herd of cows strolling down the main street and the sounds of cars struggling around massive potholes on the neglected dirt roads, the village of Wazzani is hearing a new sound - one with a Spanish twist. "Hola! (Hello!)" cries teenager Nawal Ahmed, sporting a bemused smirk.

The momentary shock of hearing Spanish quickly dies away as one notices members of the Spanish UNIFIL contingency standing behind Ahmed - assault rifles on their backs, smiles on their faces.

Following her lead, Ahmed's nearby friends release a barrage of Spanish phrases.

"Como te llamas? [What is your name?]," one asks.

"Como estas? [How are you?]," queries another.

Speaking over the ebb and flow of the disconnected Spanish conversations that ensue among the students, one member of the Spanish unit explains the phenomenon.

He and his fellow soldiers arrived in Lebanon two months ago and found that their predecessors in Wazzani had begun teaching Spanish to the local children, as have other groups of Spanish UNIFIL troops stationed throughout the South. Eager to pick up where their colleagues left off, this new group of soldiers offers classes four days a week, with each session lasting about an hour. The 15 students are 18 years old or younger, the soldier says, although he requested anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

Perhaps reflective of the remote nature of the town, Ahmed, a cow herder, readily admits that books and studies do not interest her. But her newfound eagerness to learn a foreign language is apparent from her broad grin.

On this particular day, the children surround three of the Spaniards and present them with a Spanish-Arabic dictionary, clearly wishing to reciprocate in the language-sharing experience.

Asked if they had managed to learn any Arabic, one of the Spanish soldiers, looking a bit overwhelmed, replies with a smile, "Un poquito [a little bit]."

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