

Monaco's Prince Albert visits young Iraqi refugee recovering from heart surgery



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PARIS, France, June 15 (UNHCR) – Prince Albert II of Monaco has shown his personal support for a medical accord with UNHCR by visiting a five-year-old Iraqi refugee recovering from heart surgery in Monte Carlo.

The Monaco leader called on Basim Omar Basim last Thursday at the Cardio-Thoracic Centre, where the infant underwent a life-saving operation earlier this year under an accord between UNHCR and the Mediterranean principality's Office of International Cooperation. The boy had had a first operation in Monaco in 2009, but needed to return for more surgery this year.



Prince Albert II of Monaco plays with five-year-old Basim Omar Basim during a visit to Monte Carlo's Cardio-Thoracic Centre.

Basim was chosen for surgery when two doctors from Monaco, François Bourlon, a cardio-thoracic paediatrician, and orthopaedic surgeon Tristan Lascar, were flown to Damascus by UNHCR and the Monaco government in 2009 to examine Iraqi refugee children in need of medical treatment not available in Syria.

The boy was flown free of charge to Monaco by the Aviation Sans Frontieres charity. Funds for the medical programme were raised in 2008 by various charity groups to mark Prince Albert's 50th birthday. UNHCR has been handling administrative and logistical aspects of the programme as well as working with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent to identify children in need of care. During their stay in Monaco, the young patients stay with host families selected and assisted by the NGO Rencontres Africaines.

Basim was born in Syria after his family fled Iraq in 2006 because his father had received several death threats and his shop was bombed. The boy was diagnosed with a genetic heart disease that required surgery in Syria when he was only one. He had a second operation in Monaco in July 2009.

"We are very pleased with this partnership," said Philippe Leclerc, UNHCR's representative for France and Monaco. "We hope that more medical evacuations will follow in the near future," he added. A second refugee child is expected to arrive from Syria in September for treatment at the Cardio-Thoracic Centre.

"Like all children of his age, Basim likes computer games and video consoles, as well as drawing and colouring. He also loves chocolate," said Lamis Hermassi, who deals with health-related issues at the UNHCR office in Damascus, and knows Basim and his parents well.

The Principality of Monaco, situated on the French Riviera, is the world's second smallest independent nation. It has a surface area of 196 hectares (485 acres) and is home to around 32,000 people, making it one of the most densely populated countries on earth.

By William Spindler in Paris, France.