Bethlehem to host first-ever marathon in April

Agence France Presse (AFP)
March 14, 2013 - 12:00am
http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/bethlehem-to-host-first-ever-marathon

The not-so-little town of Bethlehem is to host the West Bank's first-ever marathon next month in a race starting at the Nativity Church and taking in several refugee camps, organisers said Wednesday.

The brainchild of two Danish women runners, the Palestine Marathon will take place on April 21 and offer runners the choice of three distances: a full 42-kilometre marathon, a half marathon or a 10-kilometre race.

But given the problems of finding an uninterrupted 42-kilometre stretch within Area A, the small portion of the Israeli-occupied West Bank which is under full Palestinian control, those running the full distance will have to do two loops of the town on a course which passes through Aida refugee camp.

"We thought it would be good to have a positive activity to show a different side of life here," said Signe Fischer, who has been working for a Danish non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Jerusalem for several years.

"We wanted to give Palestinians a new type of activity where they can explore their beautiful countryside," she said, adding that the event has no political agenda and has been two years in the planning.

The event is being organised in coordination with an umbrella NGO called Right to Movement and the Higher Council of Youth and Sports.

News of the race emerged a week after the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, announced it was cancelling its third annual Gaza marathon after the ruling Islamist Hamas movement
refused to let men and women run together.

But Ms Fischer said the Palestine Marathon was aimed at encouraging all people to start running, particularly women.

"We have been having practice runs in Beit Jalla since January and now we have 30 people joining every week," she said.

"People have worked hard to get up to 10km but I've got six weeks to get them up to 21km," she said, referring to the half marathon. "They are very excited to be exploring their countryside this way."

Organisers say up to 100 international participants have already signed up for race, and hundreds of Palestinians have expressed an interest although local registration only opens this week.