



# WAITING *for* PEACE

By Cassidy Hazelbaker

In March 2011, civil discord started in Syria, prompting the departure of Syrians to relative safety in neighboring Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq. As the months have rolled on and the violence spreads and deepens, what first began as a trickle of people here and there has become a flood of refugees, as thousands of people flee Syria each day. In March 2013, the number of refugees seeking shelter and safety outside of Syria passed the 1 million mark.

With no end to the current violence in sight, this number is ever increasing. The international community's response has been largely criticized as inefficient and inadequate, and a stalemate between members of the UN Security Council has resulted in a stalled political response to the Syrian crisis. While much more help is needed, there are organizations on the ground in neighboring countries assisting Syrian refugees.

Syria's location, with Turkey to its north, Iraq to its east, Jordan to its south and Lebanon and Israeli-Palestinian territories to its west, has led to refugees fleeing the country in all different directions. From newborn babies to the elderly, Syrian refugees come from all walks of life but are united in their desire to escape the fear and threat of attacks on their homes and loved ones. Most have arrived with very few possessions; often they have only the clothes they are wearing and very limited savings. As neighboring countries try to accommodate the influx of refugees while maintaining their own domestic, political, and economic order, many NGOs are on the ground helping these newly-arrived and displaced groups.

UNICEF, UNHCR, Red Crescent, International Rescue Committee, CARE International and other organizations are onsite near the border crossings distributing food, water, clothing, shoes, blankets, heating fuel and other necessary supplies. However, the funding received falls short of what is needed to adequately assist all of the refugees. This growing humanitarian crisis has caught the attention of sympathizers worldwide.

While the struggle to finance the aid initiatives to registered refugees is already great, additional fundraising is necessary to provide unregistered refugees with the supplies they need. The UNHCR estimates that there are an additional 235,000 refugees who are waiting to be registered. After crossing the border out of Syria, it often takes several days and sometimes even longer to complete registration. Until their refugee status has been made official, they live in squalid conditions, often without basic services such as electricity, and are not granted access to supplies or support.

## HELPING HANDS

The Dubai-based Rotary Jumeirah, a branch of the international Rotary Foundation with no political or religious leanings, noticed the lack of resources accessible to both registered refugees and refugees-in-waiting and wanted to step in to help fill this 'aid void.' Rotary Jumeirah worked with a group of Rotarians in Jordan to address this growing need. The group met with Bareface Entertainment and organized a fundraising auction and entertainment night to collect resources for refugees, which they will be distributing soon. Rotary Jumeirah is joining efforts with the Red Crescent and Groupon to plan a medical supplies fundraiser and with



Refugee children play in Shatila camp, Lebanon





A Syrian refugee family huddles in a dilapidated house near the Syrian border, Jordan



A Save the Children caretaker supervises children while in the Child Friendly Space in Zaatari refugee camp, Jordan



Zaatari refugee camp, Jordan



Syrian refugee children playing in the Child Friendly Space in Zaatari refugee camp, Jordan

Electricians without Borders to increase the electricity supply in the refugee camps. Hayet Zenati of the Rotary Jumeirah Community Service Committee says that, “the public response has mostly been positive, although a few people have been wary of political affiliation. The group’s activities are completely neutral,” she assures, “we just want to help civilians who are fleeing violence.”

Rotary Jumeirah has also teamed up with Save the Children, a large NGO which has been proactive in addressing the needs of Syrian refugees, especially the hundreds of thousands of children whose lives have been forever changed by departure from their hometowns. Save the Children has launched initiatives to address not only the physical pain of leaving Syria but also the psychological trauma endured by children throughout the ordeal.

ON THE GROUND

Jordan has close to 317,000 refugees and around 50,000 more refugees-in-waiting who live in camps near the border or in host communities, according to the UNHCR. Save the Children has created 57 child and youth-friendly spaces in the region, 35 of which are in Jordan. These spaces provide toys, learning aids, materials to produce artwork and the opportunity to sing, dance and generally socialize with other children - all therapeutic outlets for children whose childhoods have been torn away from them. A nine-year-old girl named Nur, whose home village was destroyed, declares, “I do not play.” When asked “why?” she responds, “Because I am not young anymore.”

Many children have seen bombs and shelling destroy their houses, schools, and the landmarks of the towns they used to call home. Some have seen friends and family members killed in front of them. Other children and even toddlers have been subjected to torture and abuse simply for belonging to a family with a particular political affiliation or for residing in a town which has become involved in one side or the other of the fighting.

A Dubai-based clinical psychologist, who prefers to remain anonymous, explains that children exposed to violence, “grow up with insecurity and troubled emotions, which is exacerbated if their family support system is weak and insecure.” Save the Children tries to mitigate the psychological damage and emotional trauma by offering counseling services and fostering as supportive an environment as possible.

Children residing in these spaces are often found decorating the trailers or tents in which they play with brightly-colored paints. Witnessing violent conflict and being uprooted from their homes, friends, families, and schools and being placed in a foreign environment which lacks a stable structure are all deeply traumatic circumstances for the children. The psychologist adds that a child’s, “initial formative years of social and emotional development are fundamental to their human development. Though every child is different, small children around the ages of two or three tend to forget violence more easily, whereas children a bit older can display behavioral problems later on due to trauma.”

Refugee children, especially those who are placed into host homes and thus mixed with non-refugees, often find it hard to get along with the local children who do not share the traumas of fleeing their own homes and settling into new ones. In Save the Children’s child-friendly spaces, both children staying in the camps and those in host housing have the opportunity to interact with other refugee children who share similar experiences. They are thus able to form new friendships and play together, all under the supervision of social workers who have been specially trained by Save the Children to watch over children from such backgrounds.

The presence of child-friendly spaces also serves to reassure parents that their children are safely supervised for a few hours of the day which then allows them to complete emergency registrations and to re-establish their families’ lives. Soha Ellaithy, Director of Gulf Partnerships of Save the Children, states that the number of Syrian children positively impacted by the spaces is in the thousands.

“Each center accommodates between 80-200 children daily and we are running 57 centers across the region,” she said. “We started running these centers since the crisis started in March 2011. In January and February 2013, we reached more than 131,557 children and adults with emergency assistance. By April, we’re determined to reach at least 230,000 people, over half of which are children.”

Lebanon, which has always had strong links with Syria, has seen an influx of over 240,000

registered refugees with nearly 150,000 more unregistered according to UNHCR statistics.

“The Lebanese government wants to avoid the establishment of camps so families are cramming into small flats that they rent and share with other families,” explains Zenati.

Those who cannot afford to rent a flat have moved into unfinished buildings, abandoned schools, barns, and informal tented communities composed of billboards and tarpaulin. Rotary Jumeirah is contributing to Save the Children’s Back to School program in which refugee children are tutored in French language skills so that they can keep up with the Lebanese curriculum and not be too far behind in their studies, despite the upheaval they have had to experience.

Though immigration restrictions have been tighter than in some of the other neighboring countries, there are over 100,000 registered refugees in Iraq states UNHCR. There are also thousands of Iraqis who settled in Syria after the recent conflict in Iraq and who now find themselves again entrenched in discord. Many refugees live in the Al Qaem camp, where there is no hot water for showers and improper drainage which impacts both their health and comfort. People from all walks of life have had to leave everything behind to escape getting caught up in the violence and to assure their children’s safety. There is also a large fuel shortage which has resulted in refugees suffering in miserably cold conditions during the winter months. Multiple families crowded around a fuel-burning heater to find some warmth only

to get choked and teary-eyed from the resulting black smoke is a common occurrence. Save the Children and other aid groups are campaigning to raise funds in order to provide refugees with proper infrastructure to ensure safe and hygienic living. In interviews conducted by Save the Children, parents expressed sadness that they no longer can provide even the most basic clothing or nutritious food to their families, and regret that their children’s educations have been disrupted. They are worried about the uncertainty of their children’s futures. Children in the refugee camps often express the simple desire to resume their normal lives - they want to go back to Syria and go home. The reality though for many is that their former homes have been reduced to rubble.

The conflict in Syria has been termed one of the worst in modern history, largely due to the sluggish reaction of the international community. Save the Children, the Rotary, and the numerous other organizations on the ground are helping as much as they can, but more resources are needed. The trauma currently experienced by the million refugees and the millions more who are still in the midst of the violence, will mark not only those who are experiencing it first-hand, but also generations to come. The faster a political solution is reached, the quicker people can go about either returning to their homes in Syria or rebuilding their lives elsewhere. But with the end seemingly far from near, the world must watch and support from afar.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Save the Children is appealing for \$94 million to enable them to appropriately respond to the humanitarian crisis. Help them achieve this sum by making a donation.

WHAT YOUR DONATIONS CAN DO:

\$10 (37 AED) can provide one infant supplies kit

\$50 (184 AED) can provide one household supplies kit for a newly arrived family

\$125 (460 AED) can provide a ‘Back to School’ package for a student in Lebanon for one academic year

\$50,000 (183,655 AED) can allow 1,500 children to attend a child-friendly space every day for one month in the Al Qaem camp in Iraq

WHERE YOU CAN DONATE:

Save the Children  
[savethechildren.org](http://savethechildren.org)

Red Cross  
[redcross.org.uk/Donate-Now/Make-a-single-donation/Syria-Crisis-Appeal](http://redcross.org.uk/Donate-Now/Make-a-single-donation/Syria-Crisis-Appeal)

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