

Palestinian refugees in Syria

Most vulnerable victims of the war

The situation of the Palestinian refugees in Syria (PRS) is one of the most compelling circumstances of refugees ever. PRS is one of the poorest groups in Syria. At a total of about 20 million Syrians, only 570.000 are PRS. In these 3 years of armed conflict, very little access is given for humanitarian agencies in providing aid to the thousands of PRS living in camps, closed areas, such as in Yarmouk. Many of them, not at least women and children, died because of the lack of food or water and are affected by diseases as a result of bad health conditions. The numbers of deaths are rising. PRS are not welcome in other countries. They do not know where to go!

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine (UNRWA) ¹started its mandate in 1949, after the creation of the state of Israel and after the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. Hundreds of thousands Palestinians have been forced to leave their homes and live in refugee camps in countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Egypt and in the West Bank and Gaza. UNRWA has delivered assistance to PRS in Syria for over 60 years.

Of the 540.000 PRS, almost all of them require assistance. In peacetime UNRWA offers the refugees "normal" services such as food, health care, water, school infrastructure, etc. But now in war time, UNRWA is making extra efforts in assisting the victims of the war. They can only do so if they are allowed access entering the camps. On 18 January 2014, UNRWA was able to distribute limited food parcels to PRS in Yarmouk. The limited access so far has

¹ <http://www.unrwa.org/>

suggested that most civilians remaining in Yarmouk have very large and desperate humanitarian needs.

Palestine refugees disproportionately affected: by January 2014, approximately 50% had been displaced within Syria (270.000 of 540.000 registered) with a further 50.000 seeking shelter in Lebanon, 10.000 in Jordan and many thousands more in other countries. All Palestine refugee camps in Syria are affected by conflict, with camps in Damascus becoming active battlegrounds: Yarmouk, Khan Eshieh, Khan Danoun, Sbeineh. These camps, some speak about ghettos, are mainly located at the border of main cities, and thus one of the first areas for the battle fields.

UNRWA tried to manage buildings currently shelter 13.624 individuals. But the vast majority of displaced have been forced to seek expensive, overcrowded accommodation elsewhere. Many of them have been displaced twice or more times. Several UNRWA officers have been killed or are kidnapped.

UNRWA appeals to all sides to allow the basic materials to be delivered into Yarmouk and the other camps. It is hoped that the latest Resolution of the UN Security Council (22 February 2014) can be of help in getting the entrances open of the camps.

PRS in Lebanon

About 52.000 PRS live in Lebanon. 51 % live in UNRWA camps, and the rest live in private rented accommodation or informal gatherings. UNRWA continues to monitor and offer advice and assistance to PRS crossing at the border and to advocate with the Lebanese government for equal treatment of all refugees at the border, as, since August 2013, a number of refugees from Syria, including PRS, have been denied entry into Lebanon.

PRS in Jordan

In Jordan, about 11.000 PRS are recorded with UNRWA. Most PRS, 98%, reside in local communities with host families or in rental premises, while 196 reside in Cyber City, the government-

appointed facility in Irbid. A large number live in abject poverty, and their precarious legal status creates difficulties for civil processes, access to services and employment. 48% are under the age of 18 and women and children comprise 75% of PRS in Jordan.

Jordan revealed its policy of non-admission of PRS in January 2013, which continues to compound the extreme vulnerability of those who seek safety in Jordan or have already entered the country. Incidents of denied entry and forcible return have been documented. Jordan should be urged to grant temporary access and protection of PRS.

Responsibly to Protect! Europe Act Now!

It is believed that the EU could and should do more. In the Syrian civil war, the EU is too much at the side, both in terms of politics as well as in welcoming Syrian refugees, including the PRS. The EU and the whole international community have a responsibility to protect and provide shelter for victims of war.

The EU and its 28 member states, should take the following 3 steps:²

1. Give refugees a safe way into Europe

Refugees have very few possibilities to travel to Europe safely and legally. Those who want to get to Europe put their lives in the hands of smugglers or face life-threatening journeys.

European leaders must support greater access to Europe for Syria's refugees by relaxing visa restrictions, significantly increasing resettlement places above and beyond current national quotas and offering other forms of admission through embassies in the region.

2. Protect refugees arriving at Europe's borders

² <http://www.ecre.org/>

Lives are in danger at Europe's doorstep. Many refugees risk death attempting the treacherous journeys by land or by sea, only to be sent straight back as soon as they reach Europe's borders.

European leaders must put an end to all push-backs at the borders and ensure that people in distress are rescued. The people who survive the journey to Europe must be humanely treated and their need for protection must be fairly assessed.

3. Reunite families torn apart by crisis

Many families are divided by the war in Syria. Flight leaves families split, often leading to prolonged separation. Others, with family members in Europe, find themselves trapped in the midst of the crisis, prevented from reuniting with loved ones by complex visa and administrative procedures.

European leaders must work to reunite divided families, helping them to easily join loved ones in Europe. Family members should not be subjected to lengthy and difficult administrative processes.

The conflict in Syria has generated the largest refugee movement (mostly Syrians as well as PRS) since the Rwandan genocide and is described as the defining refugee crisis of our era and as such needs specific attention. A crisis of this magnitude on our doorsteps requires European solidarity. We should stand for what is right!

Brussels, 27 February 2014

Fr. Paul Lansu
Senior Policy Advisor Pax Christi International