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Bringing aid and hope to Syrian refugees

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“Syrians are everywhere,” an aid worker told me. “Everybody is poor now.” Well over a million Syrians are scattered across Lebanon, many in small “tented settlements.” Almost half live in substandard housing; many lack fuel and warm clothes for winter.

Jordan hosts even more Syrians at greater cost. (So does Turkey, though it is much larger and wealthier.) Six of every seven refugees live in poverty.

Almost five years of civil war have killed a quarter million Syrians, wrecked the country, created economic catastrophe, displaced millions and left virtually no one unaffected. As many as 5 million people have fled to surrounding countries.

Thus, the stampede of Syrian migrants to Europe should not surprise. Unfortunately, granting sanctuary to those fleeing repression and war is generating rising political opposition.

Still, people can contribute financially. With governments falling short of expectations, private relief groups have greater responsibility. Yet they also have suffered financially as people’s attention has wandered.

Nevertheless, NGOs offer the best means to help Syrians in need. There are many worthy organizations. Earlier last year I traveled with International Orthodox Christian Charities to Lebanon and Jordan to view several aid projects. Since 2012 the charity has helped more than 3.2 million Syrians throughout the Middle East.

Much of IOCC’s work is conducted in Syria. More than half Syria’s population now is estimated to require outside aid.

Assistance runs the gamut, starting with emergency food, infant care, clothing and bedding. IOCC repairs sanitation and water systems, helps provide shelter and supports education. The group deploys “rapid action teams” to address the consequences of new outbreaks and escalations of fighting.

The longer the war rages, the greater the destruction. One aid official lamented: “Buildings can be rebuilt. You cannot rebuild human beings.”

IOCC has been active in Lebanon since 2001, when it began aiding Lebanese still recovering from their civil war, which ended only in 1990. One program that I visited focused on mother-

child nutrition, from conception up to five years. The “public health system was overwhelmed by refugees,” explained Rana Hage of IOCC.

The program is open to all, though refugee families predominate. Children are screened and then regularly measured and weighed, with nutritional supplements, high-protein foods and milk provided.

Pregnant and lactating women also receive nutritional aids. IOCC also trains Lebanese agencies to educate mothers and provide emergency assistance. Tens of thousands of children have been screened and hundreds have been rescued from malnutrition.

I visited a community kitchen, one of two that help feed 1,750 people. IOCC underwrote a large, efficient cooking facility and hired local women to cook. Pots of food are distributed to needy families — both refugee and resident.

The charity also runs the WASH program at two refugee encampments with more than 7,500 people. I went to the nearby Bar Elias Settlement. IOCC seeks to develop efficient and safe water and waste systems.

The agency also establishes water and washing facilities while providing hygiene education to reduce disease. Here as elsewhere IOCC hires staff from areas being served. Unfortunately, the job is never done. Said another aid worker, tents are “everywhere, everywhere,” and the camp is “constantly changing as more people come.”

Jordan may be less fragile than Lebanon but suffers greatly as well. Some 80,000 people are crowded into Jordan’s Zaatari Refugee Camp, well-organized but with very basic conditions, sitting only a few kilometers from Syria.

IOCC runs a program to prevent and treat lice, especially affecting children. The charity has distributed anti-lice kits to more than 20,000 kids. There’s nothing glamorous about this sort of work, but it meets a critical need. Health coordinator Samer Makahleh explained: “To fill gaps we go to outside partners like IOCC.”

With most refugees living outside the camps, IOCC works outside as well, even making home visits for those unable to travel. The group provides everything from school uniforms — required to attend Jordanian schools — to infant supplies and household items. IOCC also provides vocational training and English instruction.

IOCC’s identity is Christian. But it serves the needy without discrimination. In the Middle East the charity mostly aids Muslims. IOCC seeks to moderate the immediate crisis while preparing people for a better future.

Of course, even the best humanitarian efforts can only do so much. One top IOCC official worried: “Funding is going to diminish next year. Donors are not going to be there.”

Centuries ago Christ called on his listeners to help the “least among us.” We must meet that challenge today.

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