

Syrian refugees desperately need our help

What is unfolding in Syria is much more than the familiar story of violent political opposition in a volatile region; it is the story of a humanitarian emergency afflicting millions of innocent families and children.

The war in Syria ignited in March 2011 on the heels of the Arab Spring, with a slew of nationwide demonstrations against President Bashar al-Assad. Media attention is focused on the ongoing battle between Syrian rebels and government forces, and less so on arguably the most grave ongoing refugee situation in the world. According to recent United Nations (UN) estimates, 2 million people have fled the country, with approximately 4.25 million more internally displaced. There have been over 100 000 deaths thus far, and UNICEF recently reported that one million children have been forced to flee their country as refugees.

Jordan, Syria's neighbour to the south, has seen the second largest influx of displaced Syrians. The now infamous Zaatari refugee camp in northern Jordan, operated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), was intended to house 60 000 refugees — its numbers have now swelled to 120 000, making it Jordan's fifth-largest city and the second-largest refugee camp in the world.

I spent one week in northern Jordan in March 2013 as a public health student and pediatrician to gain a better understanding of the refugee situation and the child protection issues. More than half of Syria's refugees are children. The majority of them have fled with their family members, and many have witnessed horrific atrocities, including the torture and death of loved ones. Aid workers are dealing with a generation of children who have not only lost their homeland, but also have endured irreparable psychological trauma that is hard to imagine.

Child marriage — a practice that is culturally accepted in Syria but illegal in Jordan and under UNHCR guide-



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lines — is on the rise among the Syrian refugee population, viewed as a way of protecting daughters from sexual violence in the camp. Children often become increasingly vulnerable to human rights violations during humanitarian crises, and child protection agencies such as UNICEF are working tirelessly at Zaatari to protect children from disease, sexual exploitation and trafficking. Recent reports have enforced the image of an overstretched and underfunded refugee camp, well on its way to becoming unsustainable. In the camp's pediatric clinics, doctors are flooded with complaints of kerosene burns, upper respiratory tract infections and asthma, all likely related to the deplorable living conditions.

According to one aid worker, it is estimated that UNHCR is currently operating at a third of the budget needed to sustain the camp. The UN's recent appeal for US\$4.4-billion, the largest in history, is evidence that the need is immense. Clearly, there is no simple solution to address the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis in Jordan and elsewhere in the region. The fighting within Syria is not straightforward, with evidence of terrorist organizations engaging in combat. The apparent use of chemical weapons has now spurred a flurry of debates on whether the United States and its Western allies should engage in

military action in the imminent future.

Yet, although military engagement by the US and its Western allies to bring the opposing parties to the negotiating table is critical, so too is competent and adequately resourced humanitarian intervention. As the refugee crisis continues to unfold, what Syria truly needs is more funding and more public awareness.

Although my time at the camp was very brief, I persistently encountered aid workers with knowledge of the "old Syria," and a deeply entrenched respect for Syria's culture and its people, particularly the dignity and integrity with which they continue to try to live their lives. The fortitude and resilience of the human spirit in times of absolute despair is an extraordinary phenomenon, and Syrians are no exception. With the projected number of refugees fleeing Syria rising, and hundreds of thousands of Syrians camped along the borders, it is time that we finally listen and act to give Syrians and their children the peaceful refuge they so desperately deserve.

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