

## **The Refugee Crisis in Europe Facts, Fiction and Fear An Eyewitness' Perspective**

During the past year we have heard from politicians, church leaders, and many others regarding the Syrian refugee crisis in the Balkans and Western Europe. Unfortunately much of the discussion has been based upon murky facts or fiction and in some cases outright fear. Are the Syrian refugees really people fleeing a civil war and ISIS to protect themselves and their families from death or persecution, or are they people looking to sneak into western society for economic gain, or are they terrorists? Why would they flee from a country that ten years ago was perhaps the most educated, economically successful, and modern country in the Middle East? The facts can seem elusive. As a result, when the truth is not self-evident we often move on and give little more thought to the sparse information we have.

Then something blasts through, something so devastating and gut wrenching that we are forced to focus our attention. For instance, last September the world saw the images of three-year-old Alan Kurdi lying dead on a beach in Turkey. He was in a group of refugees trying to make their way to Greece when their boat capsized. We looked at that picture and thought, "That could be any child, that could be my child." Suddenly the death of a small child put a human face on a much larger human tragedy that was previously too easy to ignore.

The reality that we see is a 'river of humanity' stretching from Syria to Northern Europe. There are 4.7 million Syrians who have fled their homes, cities and country because they encountered an impossible choice: stay where you are and face certain death or simply risk death and flee for your lives. Staying and fighting was not a choice at all; any military person knows that an unarmed, untrained civilian populace cannot fight an army or even well-armed terrorists. So the refugees set out on a desperate journey. Roughly 2.7 million are in Turkey and around 1.2 million are in Lebanon, desiring to remain close to Syria in case peace returns. Many are headed to Europe, to countries with a tradition to reaching out to refugees.

During this journey they are encountering significant hardships and are in need of the basic necessities of life - food, shelter, clothing and medical attention. Much of the aid is being provided by international aid agencies. One important agency assisting the refugees is Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and as a CRS Global Fellow in January, I was invited to participate in a delegation to Greece and Serbia to meet refugees, find out why they were fleeing, hear what their hopes are, and see the response of the worldwide Christian community to the greatest refugee crisis since World War II.

In many ways, the stories the refugees told us were as unique as they were but in one horrific way they were the same, they were all refugees due to the death and destruction all around them. A gentleman that I met named Ahmad Feres told me all too familiar story. I met Ahmad and his son Karam at a medical clinic run by Doctors Without Borders

at the Serbia ~Croatia border. Before the war in Syria began Ahmad had a job as an engineer in the city of Aleppo. He also taught on a part-time basis at the University of Aleppo. Ahmad holds a Masters degree in engineering and is fluent in three languages including English. He and his wife have three children a boy who is 12, a second son who is seven and a daughter who is five. Ahmad was at the clinic with the seven-year-old named Karam, who was not feeling well. Karam is fluent in both Arabic and English. According to Ahmad, his eldest son was an excellent student up until the time the schools closed in Aleppo three years ago. His younger children had not yet started school when the education system closed. Since that time, Ahmad and his wife have been doing the best they can to educate their children at home.

I asked Ahmad to tell me about the circumstances that led to them becoming refugees fleeing Syria. He told me that 18 months ago their home was destroyed in one of the attacks which have been raging around the city of Aleppo. He moved his family to another house and it was also destroyed in an attack. After moving to a third and then fourth house which were also destroyed they ended up in a small room on the outskirts of town. The area was not safe because it continually was the site of battles between the Assad regime and the rebels fighting against Assad. Almost 80% of their home city has been destroyed, and basic services like electricity and water are no longer available. He told me that society had collapsed and life is they previously knew it was gone. To save his children he and his wife decided to leave; that is until peace returns. When that happens he will return home to Syria. He told me, "I am Syrian and I loved my country, why wouldn't I go home?" And so Ahmad's family, like the other refugees continued their hard journey; I wish I knew if they made it to a place of safety and asylum.

Our experience and the UN High Commissioner of Refugees reports match very well. About 65% of refugees are families, 20% are couples over the age of 55 and 15% are single men or women. During their journey many die, especially during the dangerous crossing of the Aegean Sea from Turkey to Greece. In the first four months of 2016 about 1,700 human beings have died in the Aegean. Many also would die from lack of food, water, shelter, and sanitation except for the intervention of humanitarian agencies. That brings me to what the Christian community is doing.

In the true spirit of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the Christian community has seen the suffering "stranger" and has come to their aid. The organization that I work with, CRS has oversight of much of the work being carried out in the Balkans and collaborates with many religious and secular agencies to provide aid to the refugees. Organizations like Doctors Without Borders, Vlade Divak Foundation, Red Cross, Caritas and too many Protestant denominations to name, all work together to provide life sustaining aid to the refugees. Refugees are met as they arrive in Greece and are provided with food, water, medical aid when needed as well as legal counseling. Children have a chance to play with volunteers from Save the Children while their parents try to figure out the next steps to take. There is never a single question asked about the refugee's religion or politics. As the Good Samaritan did, aid is provided without discrimination or condition.

The volunteers are all young and enthusiastic. Typical of the volunteers we met was a wonderful young woman named Tadia Rastic. Taida is an interpreter in Serbia who works with refugees to explain next steps and offer necessary assistance. It gives great comfort and reduces anxiety for refugees to speak with someone who knows their language.

A woman who was more than seven months pregnant, came to the refugee transfer station feeling a great deal of pain. She assumed it was from the stress of the journey. Taida urged her to go to medical room where after a quick examination it was determined a more thorough exam was needed. The doctors in the clinic arranged to transport her to a local hospital. After an ultrasound was done, the mother was informed she would have a daughter soon. Her serious medical condition was treated and after a few days rest she was given medicine for the onward trip.

The new mother was so grateful for the assistance; she promised to name her baby girl Taida after the interpreter. The actions by Taida saved the life of the baby and possibly the mother. For Taida it was just another day caring for people in need, for the woman it meant life itself.

During our trip we heard many more stories and saw countless dedicated workers providing simple and necessary aid to those in need (to see more of the stories and for more insight visit my website: [www.DeaconsView.com](http://www.DeaconsView.com)). Humanity is the common bond that we all share despite differences in country, language, culture, religion or custom. That common bond, the dignity of each human person made in the image and likeness of God is called 'Solidarity.' The Gospel calls us to live in solidarity with our brothers and sisters, they cannot be the 'stranger' or the 'other' to a Christian. Today there are 4.7 million Syrian refugees out of a total of 19 million worldwide. Jesus never turned his back on those in need and he never taught that helping our own family or fellow citizens came first. In fact the Good Samaritan tells us the opposite and the truth. We are called to help all in need, without question and without condition; that includes the Syrian families who are struggling to survive after their decision to not die in a bloody civil war or at the hands of ISIS. You and I can make a difference, through our prayer and actions we, like Tadia Rastic can provide life to others.