Refugees in Kos stuck in appalling conditions

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Project Update | *26 August 2015*

Between January and July this year, 86,000 refugees arrived on the Greek island Kos by boat from Turkey. The majority are fleeing war and violence in Syria, but many also come from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Pakistan.

There is no adequate system to receive these people on Kos, which has resulted in chaotic scenes where many new arrivals are forced to sleep in public places or in the overcrowded, abandoned Captain Elias hotel, which lacks basic facilities. The Greek state does not provide adequate shelter, hygiene facilities, basic healthcare, protection or food. A cruise ship is currently providing registration, accommodation and transportation to Athens, but only for Syrians, and only for a temporary period of time.

MSF teams are providing medical care, water and sanitation support, shelter, non-food items and psychological support to refugees on the island. MSF urges the Greek state to take the support of the EU, to ensure the provision of an adequate transit reception system for all people arriving to Kos.

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are infinite and it is only a lack of resources and the danger associated with accessing certain areas that limits what you could or might do. Regardless of whether I worked 12 or 14 or 16 hours a day the amount of work I had to do seemed to grow from one day to the other.

For me the most difficult element was trying to imagine the long term solution to this war. Of course Kis not our mission in MSF – we are here to deal with the medical problems faced by the people not trying to find the political solution. Yet in previous projects, such as in the Ebola epidemic, it was hard but we knew we could find the solution. In this conflict, we are bringing support to people who don't have anything but who can say when the general situation here will improve.

What are conditions like in Iraq?

There are camps for refugees and internally displaced people scattered all over the Iraqi Kurdistan autonomous region. In Dohuk Governorate, where I was based, there were 18 camps alone that housed displaced people. The conditions vary from camp to camp but all suffer the same basic hardships – most people are living one family in a small tent with temperatures fluctuating from below zero in winter to around 50 degrees in summer with only the most basic access to water and sanitation, food and shelter.

The situation is perhaps even worse for those people who are not in the camps but still living in unfinished buildings and tents scattered around the cities. The buildings are large skeleton-like structures of concrete of several floors high, none of the walls are completed and they provide only the basic concept of shelter. People use plastic sheeting as walls, but again they have only limited access to water and sanitation. We worked in places where the bottom floor had been transformed into a giant open sewer. It was in the middle winter, so it was freezing cold; there was rubbish everywhere, and of course people are going to get sick, you are going to have epidemics in this kind of context.

What was your relationship with the national staff?

The staff was great. We had staff from Iraq and Syria and they were all exceptionally capable and I relied heavily on them. Outside of work, on the rare weekend when I could take a day off, we would go to the mountains or close to a river for a picnic.

Dohuk Governorate is home to around 500,000 people who are either internally displaced or refugees. Among these people, who are living in precarious situations, you have many skilled and motivated to work in any way they can to provide for their families. One of the members of my team had a degree in physics; another one had a degree in literature and was a qualified electrician.

We also had a number of our staff who left Iraq to go Europe in search of a better life, especially staff who were themselves refugees in Iraq. Some staff left with their families; despite knowing the risks they faced they saw no alternative. Many cities in Syria are destroyed, there is no hope of return, and the future of the whole country is under a heavy cloud. So what can you do? Live the rest of your life in uncertainty and wait for this protracted war to end for a chance to go home or try to build a life somewhere?

MSF is currently working in 11 governorates across Iraq in order to provide impartial and free medical care to people affected by the conflict. In the first six months of 2015, MSF teams carried out 126,722 medical consultations in Iraq.

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