

Refugee Aid in Izmir/ Western Turkey September/ October 2016

I have been travelling before, delivering medicines and wheelchairs to the Yezidi refugee camps of the autonomous region Kurdistan of North Iraq. I have seen the amount of help coming from the United World in form of organized, well-structured camps with at least somehow winter hard tents for 5 to 10 thousand people, waste organization, clean water supply, basic medical aid, spaces for women and children, even schools. Yes, there were some refugees also living outside these camps just by the streets. But they were few. Living is hard this way, no work for so many, no hope for a quick change and the fear of missing out a good future for the kids in freedom and dignity.



This time I was travelling to Turkey, a country where many Europeans go for a holiday, a country asking for entering the European Union, a country which has a deal with the EU to care for refugees from neighboring Syria and get a lot of money in return. Things should work out. I was wondering what I would be doing when I decided to join MedVint providing medical care to Syrian Refugees in the broader Izmir area. Would I be helping local structures or would I be imposing arrogantly “the better European” help besides the existing structures?



What I found filled my heart with great sadness and I did not want to believe it. There is no official help for refugees at all! There are very few “official camps” mainly just across the border to Syria, where maybe 10% of all refugees are living like I had seen in Iraq. The other 90% are just not wanted, not seen, not cared for. And as Turkey officially has no refugee-problem no bigger NGO is allowed in. No UNHCR, no Doctors Without Borders, no Safe The Children, no Red Cross – no journalists!!! – just very few, very small self-made, more or less illegal NGOs operating below the official level, providing grass root help, just doing without asking and trying not to be seen, not to be kicked out.



To understand the situation in Turkey one needs to know how the system works: When arriving in Turkey refugees are requested to register in whatever city they may want to. Usually it's the first city they arrive at. Being registered allows for subsidized but still paid medical help. It does not mean receiving aid for food or shelter or schooling for the kids. Refugees must stay in this city. If they want to move they must apply for it and the process will take several months. So many face the situation of not finding work where they are registered and they move on illegally to get work at other places like farm work on the cotton fields, vegetable farms, brick factories and thus make money for food and shelter. But there is no subsidized medical help when living in the wrong place ...

People follow the work and stay as seasonal workers next to the fields in makeshift tarp tents. When the work is done they move on. No permanent structures are allowed by the authorities, even if the landlord is nice and wants to help more. Refugees are not allowed to settle. If they just do their jobs and stay quiet in easily to remove non-permanent tents, police will close their eyes. As soon as foreigners or refugees themselves start making noise, they will have to go – wherever ...



Look at the children of Izmir for a while, the youngest of refugees who live in those tarp tents. Children like these live all over the world, unaware of life elsewhere in the world or how it should be for all children. As we arrive at the camps in our small car, filled with medicines like a mobile pharmacy, we are quickly surrounded by the most beautiful children with smiling faces. They excitedly shout “a’bla, a’ bla”, “big sister, big sister.” Stepping out of the car the young children surround us, grabbing our hands and leading us into their tents. Human waste is lying around anywhere. No system of dealing with all this waste. Water, which is meant for watering the fields, spurts out of pipes, leaks springing up along its length. Pools of mud and waste threaten to flood the camp.



Despite these conditions, the children run and play, and many of them seem healthy 'enough.' If they are not sick or injured we teach them how to drink only filtered and boiled water, wash their hands, brush their teeth, avoid burns from unprotected fire pits, and encourage them to wear shoes and eat clean food. They do not go to school but like to learn new games and practice English with us. We dance together and sing Arabic and English children songs.



Not all of the children are so fortunate to be in good health. Some have moderate to severe illnesses, parasites, infections and many injuries and burns. All cooking is done on open fire and when waste is getting too much, it is burnt including toxic plastic etc. Babies are often born premature here and they do not receive ANY follow up care with the hospital after birth. The women who are lucky to get to a hospital while in labor are usually sent home the same day they deliver; whether naturally or by cesarean, they must go home to their dirty tents THE SAME DAY. Premature babies do not get special care unless it is considered an immediate life-threatening emergency. Unless we as Western colleagues can prove to a sympathetic Turkish doctor that this specific refugee child will be likely to die without specific treatment, it is impossible for them to be seen without large amounts of money to be paid beforehand. Perhaps this is possible for some, but most of them don't have the money. The war they did not choose has taken away their right to live freely. Instead of learning maths, literature, and science, those children learn of fire, disease, loss, and pain.



When we arrive at a camp, the children surround us and run to greet us. The women clear out a tent and make sure there are pillows or rugs for us to sit on while we share freshly brewed tea that was made just for us. Everyone gathers around and stories of family, danger, life, birth, death, and suffering fill the tarp walls. We laugh and we cry, and we tease and tickle the children. Suddenly these people are no longer my imagination, no longer numbers of statistics, they are my patients.



Where can they go? If they stay in Syria they face the Russian barrel bombs from the sky and ISIS on the ground. If they make the treacherous journey to Turkey they risk being shot on sight or killed in the mountains. But what else can they do? They just move on and try to keep on living. When people arrive newly at a camp we care for, they are usually in a bad condition. We give deworming medicine to all and instructions on how to boil water and protect themselves from parasites and bacteria found in waste and food.

Many of these people have been camping next to the border for about a month, hoping for a chance that a smuggler would successfully sneak them out of their deteriorating nation and into Turkey. They spent most of their money to pay the smugglers and are now malnourished and exhausted; several are pregnant. Many of them have misunderstood what the conditions are in Turkey. Every smuggler promises much better conditions than actually will be provided for by the new country. This is true for those arriving in Turkey the same as for those arriving here in Germany.



The people work hard until 6 or 7 in the evening, breathing in toxic chemicals and dust in the extreme heat of the brick furnaces. Children are preferred by the commissioner for this work because they are cheaper. Conditions are hazardous and the work is extremely difficult (not to mention illegal). Many children get injured while working, and of course, no one assumes the responsibility, and their broken bones are left unset and untreated. Others do not work in factories, but work in the fields picking and peeling fruits and vegetables (also illegal, and also pregnant women and children). If they have a good landlord, they will be permitted to live on the farm (in exchange for rent money of course) and work all day for 10-12 Euros. If you are Syrian, you are paid less than the other workers. You may or may not ever be paid. It is illegal for you to live in the tarp tent you pay rent for and you may be thrown out by the police. If you are Syrian you have no rights and no power. You have little hope of accessible healthcare, and sympathetic doctors are few. The handful of doctors eager to help the refugees can neither justify nor manage the workload to see all of the Syrian people.

It feels like being thrown back into the stories of how life was for the working people during the beginning of industrialization. The people we met in Turkey are the normal simple people from small towns and countryside in Syria. Most of them are poor, have been poor before. They will never have the money to move on. They just stay. Those being more educated, having more money, try everything to move on towards Europe. They try their best to reach a place and situation where there is legal work for them, where they can just make their living, find education and a future for their kids, where they can have lives at their choice – how can we not understand? What would we do ourselves?

