A New Zealand doctor visits a Syrian refugee camp in Iraqi Kurdistan

My husband and I had not been living in Kurdistan for 2 whole weeks before Kurdistan opened its borders and thousands of Kurdish refugees from Syria began to pour in. With the war in Syria and the violence and trauma the people there have been facing, they were becoming desperate to find safety and so are fleeing into various countries around Syria: Turkey, Lebanon and particularly for the Kurdish refugees, Iraqi Kurdistan.

Kurdistan has had its share of unsettled times, trauma and refugee camps, but now as an autonomously governed region within Iraq it is experiencing relative stability. In fact, Kurdistan is so familiar with refugee camps it is becoming much better at logistics and coordination, all things considered.

Once the refugees cross the Syrian-Iraqi border, government buses pick them up and coordinate their relocation to a few of the various refugee camps in Kurdistan, one of which is in Arbat, about half an hour’s drive east from the city of Sulaimaniyah.

The refugees arrive at their new home, often impressively within a day of their crossing the border. With this latest tsunami of refugees the Arbat refugee camp has sped up its construction, erecting more tents, setting up hygiene facilities and connecting electricity throughout the camp. Of the 200,000 thousand refugees (and rapidly increasing) that have crossed the border, there are now 4,500 thousand Syrian refugees for whom the Arbat refugee camp is now a temporary home.

Across the dusty, treeless flattened dirt there are rows and rows of white tents: each family unit stays in a large one-room tent sleeping around 8–10 people, with an air cooler set up at one end in order to ease the 40ºC heat. Alongside the rows of tents are rows of port-a-loos and shower cubicles, each with electricity and an individual water supply, approximately one toilet and shower per four tents.

Families obtain water from a large water bladder in the centre of the camp, collecting water from a communal tap with large plastic containers and anything else that might carry water. Wheelie bins and rubbish dumpsters and the occasional rubbish truck indicated a functioning rubbish disposal system.

Samaritan’s Purse International Relief is one of the various NGOs that has steeled itself for the latest refugee influx and been a part of the first response wave. I was invited to join the team in visiting the camp and taking much-needed commodities with the possibility of needing to help with distribution.

We arrived with several tonnes of rice, sugar, lentils, chickpeas, milk powder, oil, and a whole truck-full of disposable nappies. The relief team had coordinated with the Ministry of Health to provide those items that were most needed, and met with the Arbat officials on our arrival to the camp.

What we were told was encouraging. Our white faces would not be needed to help with the distribution of the commodities as the distribution system at the camp was
already set up and functioning well from the large concrete storage depot in the middle of the camp. In fact, current needs were being met well enough that our supplies were able to be stored rather than immediately distributed.

Our team took a brief wander through the camp, greeting refugees, listening to their stories and hearing their needs. Communication was mainly in Arabic and the Syrian dialect of Kurdish, often supplemented with gestures.

Two elderly women invited us to sit with them in the shade of their tent, they told us how many children they had, who had come out of Syria, and how many sons had stayed. We listened to them speak of family members who had been lost or killed. We smiled together about our language barrier, admired nearby grandchildren and laughed about which of the team were married and which women were still eligible.

Families very readily shared that they were being well cared for, and that all their immediate needs were being met. They felt safe, secure, and felt the blessing of being in a camp that seemed to be so well organised. Their only need now was additional clothing. Local Kurds in our relief team who had had personal experience in refugee camps in years gone by were impressed and amazed at the facilities and provisions, and declared that these refugees were blessed.

I made a beeline for the Red Cross/Red Crescent Health Clinic, the only medical facility in the camp. One long pre-fab unit divided into a pharmacy and the doctor’s office, with two pharmacists, and one doctor. While speaking with the doctor I was astounded: in his 6 square metre office, he saw roughly 100 patients each day, and was on call for 24 hours for 3 days straight.

There were 4 rotating doctors that shared work at the Arbat camp, followed by work at government clinic roughly 35 km further east in Halabja. The doctor I spoke to had had 7 months’ experience as a doctor, worked alone and unsupervised with emergency support from a more experienced doctor in the Arbat town centre or the hospital services in Sulaimaniyah should patients require more treatment than the basic clinic could offer.

The facilities in the clinic were meagre: an examination couch, desk, stethoscope, thermometer, gloves and small slips of paper for each patient. At nights he slept on his examination couch in the corner of the office.

Mostly the patients he saw were children, patients with fevers, sore throats, chest infections and a considerable amount of diarrhoea despite the provision of hygiene facilities. The main problems were the lack of doctors to help share the load, and a lack of certain medications in the pharmacy.

My visit was shortly interrupted by a father bringing his infant for a check, and a mother with her baby shortly after. Privacy and confidentiality was non-existent. The patient sits at the desk and speaks with the doctor, and the waiting patients stand behind the desk, squeezed into the air-conditioned office to wait their turn.

Overall our team was impressed and encouraged by what we had seen. The facilities had been well set up and further accommodation was being constructed for more refugees expected to arrive in the coming weeks. While we have heard a lot about tensions between the coordination of various efforts, what we saw was proof that, for now, immediate needs are being met.
Rather than meet immediate needs as we thought might have been necessary, our
team was able to turn our attention to upcoming needs: the local Kurdish women at
the community project's sewing centre would be able to provide women's clothing and
Samaritan's Purse International Relief 'Operation Christmas Child' boxes are available
to give to each child in the camp at our visit next week. Having initially felt like
white-faced, camera-flashing tourists, our team began to be more encouraged by the
needs that were already being met, and the needs that we will be able to meet in future
weeks.

The Samaritan's Purse International Relief team is committed to the Syrian refugee
relief effort in Kurdistan for at least the next month, with further extensions should
many more refugees cross the border. Coordination with government agencies ensures
that we meet relevant needs, fill in gaps and contribute to the combined efforts of
various other local and international organisations such as the UNHCR and Unicef.

For more information on Samaritan's Purse International Relief visit
http://www.samaritanspurse.org

For more information on the Syrian refugee crisis and a regional overview, visit
http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php

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