

***Kuwait Donors Meeting***

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By all accounts and according to all reports, be they from aid agencies and NGOs, from government sources or from media information, the current humanitarian crisis is unprecedented in its magnitude.

It is also unprecedented in terms of the response it has generated at all levels, international, regional and national. In spite of that, it has become clear, after nearly five years of armed conflict, that the response has been uneven and subject to a variety of factors.

Humanitarian aid has been weighed down by international and regional politics played out by donor countries. It has been conditioned by the quid-pro-quo of political interests which has added a greater burden on the refugees themselves.

The effectiveness of humanitarian aid has also been restricted by heinous acts to terrorism that have tainted the refugees, painted with the same brush as the terrorists, thereby victimizing them twice.

Add to that the sheer magnitude and scale of the tragedy which has sometimes resulted, despite the best of intentions, in confusion, chaos and the inadequate, unequal and inappropriate distribution of aid.

Additionally, we are also faced with the inability of the economies and the social structures of most host countries to absorb the staggering numbers of refugees within their borders.

Those, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, are only a few of the challenges we are faced with when dealing the humanitarian aid and our response to this enormous human tragedy.

However, it is not my intention to point out only the negative.

Over the past five years international responses to the humanitarian crisis have improved exponentially; as have national, and to some extent regional responses. Structures have been put in place to respond both more systematically to basic

needs and more rapidly to emerging needs. However, despite the improvements we make, the crisis not only persists, but grows almost daily. Aid agencies find themselves forced to adapt to a rapidly changing situation and an increasing number of refugees with various needs—from providing the basics such as food and shelter; to dealing with specialized and chronic medical care; to address the needs of refugees with disabilities; to fulfilling the educational requirements of children and young adults; and last but not least, to responding to the various cultural, social, psychological and mental health difficulties faced by a traumatized population numbering in the hundreds of thousands.

This, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, is not an easy task.

After five years of ongoing armed conflict, we find ourselves dealing with more complex growing challenges and faced with ever growing obstacles. We hold meetings and conferences to examine the impact of our aid on the ground. We analyze procedures, formulate new resolutions, plans of action and strategies, and we strive to put them into practice. And even though we have not failed, we have also not succeeded because the crisis seems to grow almost as fast as we come up with solutions.

We ask ourselves: Have we been efficient? Have we worked to our full potential?

The answer here, in my opinion, is equal parts “Yes” and “No”.

We have created some effective partnerships and built collaborative networks between national, regional and international aid, relief and development agencies. There have been many examples of successful distribution of labor, responsibilities and duties according to areas of experience and expertise.

There have also been successful examples in the area of training local and national NGOs by experienced international agencies to cover the day-to-day essential, basic needs.

I have been in contact with NGOs working on the ground with refugees settled outside of urban centers in the host countries. Many of those have moved their staff and established service centers within the vicinity of refugee camps and settlements. They have also been receiving training from such international organizations as Save the Children, Doctors without Borders, Oxfam, Action Aid...to name a few.

UNHCR has created networks of local organizations and provided refugees with a listing of these NGOs along with contact information and areas of specialization.

This is another example of effective network building and efficient distribution of responsibilities.

The numbers are staggering, the crisis is overwhelming and the statistics can be very discouraging. I will not address these issues in terms of mathematics or number of services rendered and number of recipients.

I will address myself to the donors, to those who provide the funds to the children, women, men, families, elderly, and persons with physical and psychosocial disabilities. Very often we forget to put a human face to the number despite generous donations. Very often we forget that those people receiving immediate basic needs of food, shelter and medical care still have years of uncertainty ahead of them.

Therefore, I will share with you two stories from knowledge gained through people working closely with the refugees. A great majority of the Syrian refugees living in the camps come from rural communities in Syria and from impoverished working class backgrounds with little or education. They are not accustomed to taking the initiative or acting independently without guidance. They have their "UNHCR Refugee Identification" and they expect to be able to call a representative from UNHCR to deal with each and every issue of concern. When there is no immediate resolution or when there is a referral to a second party, they do not or are unable to follow up.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I may have taken too long with this example, but there is a moral to this story:

Although the coordination and collaboration efforts are efficient and potentially conducive to effective provision of service, there remains the missing link with the primary shareholder—the refugee her or himself. They are suffering from the trauma of war, anxiety of displacement, uncertainty about their futures, fear for the futures of their children, and any number of other issues that we in this room can only imagine.

There is, therefore, a great need to educate refugees about how to identify their needs and how to access appropriate service providers.

One way of doing this effectively is by recruiting leadership from within the refugee communities. These "leaders" can help provide information and offer guidance to the refugees, while at the same time becoming the informal liaisons between the service providers and the recipients.

I am also aware that the organizations for people with disabilities in host countries have been making considerable contributions to the welfare of refugees with disabilities. However, follow up and referrals have also been weak. I am personally familiar with a few such cases, but will very briefly share with you one of them:

An elderly Syrian in a refugee camp in Northern Lebanon suffers from degenerative vision failure. He refused repeated offers for rehabilitative services—i.e. providing him with and training him to use a cane, count steps... In short, teach him how to develop a degree of self-reliance when he does lose his eyesight. The psychological distress resulting from the loss of his eyesight would have been bad enough if he were still in his home, on familiar territory. But in addition to that, this elderly man, father of four, grandfather of seven finds himself displaced by war, living in a tent city having lost everything. However, when he refused all help dealing with his disability, he was not referred to psychosocial counseling.

It is certainly the enormity and scale as well as the sheer numbers and diversity of needs that represents one of the greatest obstacles.

There are many more cases that I am familiar with but I will not go through them now. We may have a chance to discuss them and offer recommendations during the discussion period.

I would like to move on to the role of regional organizations.

From my observation and from my contacts on the ground, I have come to believe that the weaker links in the network building and collaboration efforts are regional organizations.

In spite of the funds that are donated and pledged by the Arab Gulf countries for aid and relief of Syrian refugees, there are few personnel on the ground representing relief and aid organizations from those donor countries. There is also little involvement in how and where donated funds are spent.

Additionally, there is also no denying that among refugee host countries, international donors and within the media there is criticism that very few refugees have been accepted into the Arab Gulf country.

The governments of the Gulf countries have been generous with their money and their in-kind contributions to the Syrian refugees. However, I know for a fact that the citizens of those countries, given the chance, can be just as generous with their hospitality, compassion and benevolence.

I know of many families who are ready to open their hearts and their homes to children and youth who have lost their families. I also know of many youths in the Gulf with

the social conscience and responsibility who would welcome an opportunity to volunteer.

But over and above, please allow me to make a bold proposal to both the organization I represent, the League of Arab States, and to the governments of the Arab Gulf countries.

I would like to propose an initiative of "Safe Passage to Safety":

This proposal will serve a dual purpose.

The first, obviously, is to insure safe passage to Syrian families escaping war, death, carnage and massacre.

The second is achieved by providing families secure transportation using legitimate, sea-worthy vessels and establishing an infrastructure to house them while they are being vetted and processed, we can undercut and eradicate the evil of human trafficking.

We can end the tyranny of those who prey on the despair of helpless people seeking to escape certain death. We can send a message to the traffickers that they can no longer charge people their life savings in return for a less than 50% chance of arrival in a safe haven.

How many drowned babies, toddlers, children, mothers do we have to witness before we tell those traffickers in human misery that their business has been shut down and taken over by humane, caring—and vigilant—people.

And as I mentioned above the vast majority of Syrian refugees are families fleeing for their lives in the hope of finding a better future. Obviously there are elements of corruption that infiltrate them, but let us not allow these few to taint all.

Is this a proposal worth discussing, exploring, strategizing?

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to end my talk here and to leave you with this idea that I believe is worth exploring.

Thank you