IOM IRAQ:
ADDRESSING THE SYRIAN CRISIS
IOM and the Government of Japan Continue to Partner to Provide Ongoing Relief
20 years, I worked to build a house for my family and in a few moments it was burned to the ground. Before the war, I worked as a night guard at a factory, so I built our home right next to the factory and completed everything just last year. After a night of bombings and shelling, fire spread and destroyed my home, the factory, and everything we owned. Everything.

The first week without a home, we slept on the street but I couldn’t even close my eyes for fear of my family’s safety. After we became homeless, various neighbors and friends welcomed us in to their homes, but we could never stay in one place too long because there was never enough space or food. There are so many homeless people on the streets and everyone is suffering in Syria now.

I knew we couldn’t live like that forever so we decided to cross the Peshkabour border into Iraq just two days ago. IOM took us to this camp on a bus, and when we arrived we were given a tent from the Government of Japan. We are deeply thankful, but I can’t stop thinking of our home in Syria. Even if there is no war in Syria and we go back, there is no home to return to, and there is no job for me. I am becoming old and I don’t know how much strength I have to rebuild my entire life. I have a wife and two children. I don’t know what I will do. ”

In December 2013, due to Japan’s growing concern regarding the serious humanitarian situation facing Syrian refugees, the Government of Japan responded to a request from IOM and announced that they would be providing 800 tents and 10,000 jerry cans to Syrian refugees in Iraq. In addition to its donation to IOM Iraq, the Government of Japan provided 1,000 blankets and 10,000 sleeping mats to IOM Turkey. The donations to IOM Iraq and IOM Turkey are valued at $1.36 million yen, approximately $1.3 million USD.

The handover ceremony was held in Erbil on 16 December in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) Headquarters. At the official ceremony, Mr. Nobuo Kishi, Senior Vice Foreign Minister of Japan, presented a certificate to Mr. Mike Pillinger, IOM Iraq’s Chief of Mission, marking the donation of the relief items. Mr. Falah Mustafa, the KRG Foreign Minister, Mr. Nawzad Hadi, Governor of Erbil, and other representatives of the local government and international community attended the ceremony. On the day of the ceremony, the relief items were air-lifted from the Secretariat of the International Peace Cooperation Headquarter’s warehouse in Dubai and handed over to IOM Iraq in Erbil.

IOM Iraq, in coordination with the local authorities and UNHCR, erected almost 500 tents in the camps across the Kurdistan region and distributed over 4,000 jerry cans. Remaining relief items will be delivered to the most vulnerable families before the end of January 2014.

On 16 January 2014, HE Masato Takaoka, Ambassador of Japan to Iraq, and Takashi Matsumoto, from the Economic Cooperation Section of the Japanese Embassy in Baghdad, along with senior staff from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Iraq Mission visited the Basirma Camp for Syrian refugees in Erbil governorate in northern Iraq. Thanks to a donation by the Government of Japan, IOM has already constructed 160 tents in Basirma camp and is currently erecting another 100 tents to house the refugees arriving daily.

The Japanese delegation also visited IOM Iraq’s central warehouse in Erbil to learn more about the Mission’s logistics, supply chain management, and operational capacities to serve the ever-growing number of Syrian refugees, as well as IOM Iraq’s on-going assistance to the internally-displaced and the most vulnerable populations in Iraq.
After two days of non-stop shelling, my wife and I decided to flee Syria. In the morning, we quickly gathered our most valuable belongings. On our way out the door, I heard my two birds singing and I couldn’t leave them, so insisted that I take them with us. My wife thought I was being ridiculous, as she preferred we take some blankets and pillows. I have two beautiful finches. They’ve kept me calm during the chaos of the last few years. Their singing is soothing and it takes my mind off the gunfire ringing in my ears. I had to take them with me - each one in its own cage.

My wife and I got married five months ago. The violence, and the lack of food and water, made having a normal life in Syria too difficult. We were constantly in fear for our safety, so we rarely left our home. Even walking to work became impossible, and how would we be able to raise children in a war?

The journey from Kamish across the Peshkabour border and into the camp was two days. We had to cross the river, and in the boat I balanced the two birdcages on my lap. Fortunately, IOM met us at the border to take us to the camp. We were so hungry and tired after traveling so many kilometres alone.

We arrived five days ago and our first night in the camp, we were given this tent from the Government of Japan. It’s our home now and we live in it with my wife’s family. We are very grateful but I don’t know if I will have work here. We need food and warm clothes for winter. Even my birds have stopped singing in the camp. Today, I spent the day walking around the camp looking for wild rocket leaves to feed my birds. I can only hope that they will start singing again soon.”

HE Takaoka Meets Syrian Refugees

At the camp site, HE Masato Takaoka met and discussed the Syrian refugee crisis with Dindar Zebari, Deputy Head of the Department of Foreign Relations - Kurdistan Regional Government; Shokr Yaseen Yaseen, Director of the Bureau of Migration and Displacement - Kurdistan Regional Government; Tahir A. Osman, Deputy Governor of Erbil; Mr. Rizgar Nassir, Mayor of Shaqlawa; Mr. Swara Akram Ahmad, Mayor of Basirma sub-district; and international community representatives including Sokol Kondi, Head of the UNAMI office for the Kurdish region, a representative from UNHCR, along with representatives from other international agencies.

During the visit to Basirma Camp, HE Masato Takaoka spoke with the refugees to learn firsthand about the conditions in the camp and their experiences. HE Masato Takaoka was particularly interested to learn how residents of the camp were coping with the harsh winter conditions, and asked whether any kind of schooling was provided for the children living there.

Sharif Mahmoud, 24, Syrian Refugee From Kamishlu

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A newcomer to the camp waits to be settled in a tent donated by the Japanese government.
Media Coverage and Press Conference

The Japanese Embassy delegation visit prompted much interest from the media, with several local and international media organisations covering the occasion. During a press conference at the camp, HE Masato Takaoka remarked:

“The government of Japan is very concerned with the Syrian humanitarian crises and so far has pledged 155 million USD to alleviate the suffering of those affected by the war. A significant part of it went to the Kurdish Region to provide assistance for the Syrian refugees who sought shelter here. I would like to thank the host government who offered a safe haven for refugees and also IOM, UNHCR, UNICEF, and other international organizations who partnered with us in providing much needed relief. The Government of Japan will continue to monitor the situation of the Syrian refugees here and also in other countries very closely.”

Mr Zebari further elaborated, stating that, “This is an important date as the Government of Japan has once again shown support for IOM and other partners who are helping us to provide relief for the Syrian refugees. 2014 will be difficult for us as we have to shelter, every day, a growing number of Syrian refugees and we will need support from the international community.”

“I would like to take this opportunity to express my profound gratitude to the Japanese Government for providing humanitarian support to communities in need since 2003,” he concluded.

Mr Pillinger remarked, “We are all here in brotherhood with the Government of Japan, the host government, UNHCR, and other international organizations. These donations are coming from a nation that suffered from its own terrible catastrophe – the 2011 tsunami – but was able to get back on its feet, and that nation is now providing assistance to those in need elsewhere. This is a lesson in solidarity that we all should learn from, and it provides inspiration for us all.”

Continuing Assistance from the People of Japan

In addition to the 800 tents and 10,000 jerry cans that the Government of Japan provided to Syrian refugees in December 2013, the Government of Japan has funded several IOM projects in the past to aid the humanitarian response in Iraq.

In May 2013 the Government of Japan funded the IOM distribution of NFI and hygiene kits in northern Iraq, addressing the needs of 3,500 vulnerable Syrian refugees and Iraqi returnees. In addition to its response to the Syrian crisis, the Government of Japan has also contributed greatly to other IOM programmes in Iraq, providing the initial funding for the Programme for Human Security and Stabilisation (PHSS) I, which began in 2009 as part of the IOM livelihood programme. Over the years, the livelihood programme has grown into the largest and most successful project for the Mission.