

Messages from Iraqi Refugees, Cankiri Turkey

from Cathy Breen, May 6, 2015, Cankiri, Turkey

Dear Friends,

As I write I am looking out a bus window at a beautiful landscape of rolling hills and mountains. Everything is green, and the trees are budding. It is hard to know where to begin. In the past week, I have traveled hundreds of miles by bus and train in order to visit Iraqi refugees living here. Eskisehir, Ankara, Bolu, Mersin and now Cankiri. Some of the families are refugees twice over, having fled to Syria where we first met them some years ago. Others fled more recently after ISIS took Mosul last June and then the surrounding villages. Some of them I was meeting for the first time. Muslims, Christians and Palestinians, all from Iraq.

Last night Iraqi friends, refugees themselves, took me to a family I had not yet met. I thanked them for receiving me and explained how many people come with me on this trip wanting to know how he and his family are doing. Upon hearing this, he could hardly contain his emotions, his words spilling out rapidly.

"We have been waiting for someone to come!" he exclaimed. "We needed someone to visit us. We are happy that someone is thinking of us."

A handicapped sister, 39 years of age, sat on the floor beside



him. His wife and four sons surrounded him: 21, 19, 15 and 10 years of age. The family has only been registered by the Turkish government, and were given a date of December 2021 for their interview with the UNHCR. At this time, almost six years from now, their history

will be taken and the family will be asked if they have relatives anywhere else in the world. Only then might they be considered for resettlement. In the meantime, work is not permitted and children are not in school! How are they to live?

Earlier in the day I met with another refugee family with three children, ages 8 and 6 years and 4 months. They were given an interview date for the UNHCR of Sept. 2022. Yes, you read correctly seven years from now! None of the above mentioned children are in school. By 2022 these children will be 15 and 13 years of age, and the youngest just turning school age. The father's parents are both in Australia, but the UNHCR will not register that fact until 2022, unless their interview date is moved forward. The father said he pled repeatedly with the clerk at the registration office to give them a date not so far in the future.

The family I am staying with also have a 10 year old child with cerebral palsy in addition to two other daughters, 9 and 3 years old.

I held this child in my arms in Damascus, Syria in 2009. When

given no hope for resettlement, the father returned to Mosel with his wife and then, two daughters.

Both parents of the father recently received citizenship in Canada after being resettled there as refugees four years ago. The parents of the mother



have been recently resettled in Australia with refugee status. Because of his handicapped daughter, the family has been granted an interview date with the UNHCR for November of 2017. Only one and a half years to wait! Only at that interview however will their history be taken and the UNHCR will solicit information about family members living outside of Iraq. Only then might they begin the tedious path for resettlement.

One thing is clear. The UNHCR is completely overwhelmed by the refugee crisis, unable to offer protection, financial assistance, food rations, schooling, etc. Mothers and fathers are beside themselves with worry as their children are not in school. One refugee related how an Iraqi camped out in front of the UNHCR office for days in an attempt to draw attention to their plight. One of the guards told the demonstrator that Iraqi families had done the same and it had made no difference. *"Nobody cares"* is the general feeling.

Forced to look for work *"under the table,"* I heard multiple stories of Iraqis working 10 to 12 hour days for a fraction of the money Turkish people would receive for the same work or, worse yet, not receiving any compensation for their labor.

"We are like people drowning" was how one refugee described the situation. "All families are scattered, and we ask Americans who were behind all this to help Iraqis now."

Cathy Breen is a Catholic Worker who lives in NYC, and has made many trips to Iraq since the first Iraq War and the imposition of draconian sanctions of Iraq in the 90s. She has been there at least twice over the last 3 years. This is the third of a series of reports she wrote during her most recent trip this spring.