

Hope and Light for Syria

Report about my latest visit to Syria

Dear friends and supporters of the foundation „Korbgemeinschaft“,

In this letter, I should like to share with you the main impressions gathered during my latest visit to Syria. My visit program from September 17 to October 15, 2021, comprised



encounters with many Syrian interlocutors affected by severe poverty. In numerous meetings with priests, geriatric nurses and countless other people who are bravely fulfilling their Christian mission of not abandoning the poorest of the poor, long lists of shortcomings and hardships were outlined and concrete ideas for

improvement were presented. The projects proposed are meant to bring about meaningful, efficient and sustainable help enabling the recipients to eventually help themselves.

Against every hope, the humanitarian situation in Syria has further worsened. The more aggressively the economic sanctions are tightened, the deeper the misery of the people is getting. Never have I sensed as much frustration as this time. People feel extremely disconcerted and insecure. Despite warning voices from church and humanitarian circles, one does unfortunately not hear anything yet signalling an end to the sanctions. On the contrary, the repressions are getting ever fiercer and are pushing all hopes for a better life into the remote future, thus increasing the pressure on Syrians to escape the plight by flight and emigration.

During my latest visit to Syria, I was accompanied by Mr. Heinz Neff, the Secretary of KAB (the Catholic Workers' Movement) of the Diocese of Passau. The visit was used as an opportunity for talking to many people, – bishops, priests and dedicated laypersons as well as politicians. There was a meeting with the Nuncio in Damascus, who demonstrated great interest in our projects. When trying to convey my impressions and the needs outlined to me by priests and friends, there is in fact a lot that I need to report. Please allow me to break down the comprehensive information into several main points:

1. The energy crisis and its immediate impact on the humanitarian and social situation
2. The situation regarding the Corona pandemic
3. Children and youth
4. The situation of the Church
5. Appeal for help and prayer



1. The energy crisis in Syria and the inflation:

For years, Syria has been experiencing a terrible and almost unbearable energy crisis (especially the areas within the government controlled zone). There is little electricity and



Queuing up for energy rations

therefore the power supply is extremely unreliable. There is a lack of heating oil and fuel. Fuel, gas and diesel are allocated by the state in humble amounts at relatively low prices, which are still more than high enough for most citizens. But if a larger quantity is needed, you have to get the fuel on the black market. The black market prices are uncontrollable and

outrageously high. For example, a liter of diesel at the subsidized price today costs 520 SYP (about 1% of an average monthly salary). Public buses don't get more than 10 liters of diesel per day at this price, but a bus requires at least 30 liters. Therefore, a passenger now needs to pay 30,000 SYP for a ride that used to cost 3,000 SYP only two months ago. This elevated energy price pushes up the prices of all other goods that need to be transported. Public transport can no longer be operated sufficiently. Thus, for many people even the ride to work is no longer affordable. A short ride in a taxi today costs over 10,000 SYP. There is now an increasing use of motorcycles as taxis for single guests and of small trucks for the purpose of shared taxis. However, these trips are dangerous on account of the poor road conditions, as there is no money for repairing the damaged streets.

Motorcycle accidents have become more frequent, often with fatal consequences. If a seriously injured person survives an accident, the problem is how to raise the millions of Syrian pounds for necessary treatments and operations. "Korbgemeinschaft" has so far covered the costs of two such emergency operations.



Small trucks as shared taxis

The inflation rate has climbed by more than 100% within a few weeks, although the dollar exchange rate has remained approximately equal or has slightly increased. Only the state prices are stable. You get goods at the state price by means of a chip card, but the quantities are strictly rationed and far from covering even the basic needs. Only recently, more than 100 items were deleted from the list of state-subsidized goods.

The prices are increasing exponentially, while salaries have remained unchanged for 3 years. Every now and then there is a small bonus for state employees, about 50,000 SYP.

The monthly salary earned by an average public employee is by far too low for covering even the basic costs of living. Without the help of their relatives abroad, people can no longer survive. That's why I have frequently been confronted with statements of this type "We very much regret not having left the country and emigrated to Europe. We are exposed to starvation here and nobody cares for us." Even priests hope to come to Europe because they hardly have any funds at home to fulfill their pastoral tasks. Everywhere you turn, you see nothing but extreme poverty, famine, miserable living conditions, a lack of the basic goods for survival and a lack of future prospects.

Children clinging on to garbage trucks as a free ride to their schools



The energy crisis has a very negative impact on the labor market and on trade activities. The black market is currently the only still functioning market. State control is largely missing or insufficient, and the weakest members of society are always those who are hit most severely by the economic and social consequences.

Never had I personally felt as desperate during a Syria visit as last time. Three months after the previous visit, I noticed how much the humanitarian situation had aggravated in the meantime. Even if a person is working all day long, the earning is hardly enough for daily food. Without help from abroad, people in Syria today can no longer survive. Therefore, every family wants to send their young people abroad. In fact, all young people want to

come to Europe at any price because they hope to find work and to be able to thus support their parents at home.

People are dreading the start of the winter. The colder it gets, the higher the risk of diseases entailing unaffordable medical expenses.

Due to the oil shortage, there is an increasing demand for renewable energy. Unfortunately, the quality of most available photovoltaic products is poor and people of course turn to the cheapest offers.

The lack of electricity and the frequent power outages complicate everyday life and of course the labour market. Supplying the companies with electricity is hardly possible because of the high fuel costs. This reduces the profitability of companies and inevitably leads to even more unemployment.

Life in Syria is in fact no longer bearable. Fuel is in short supply, everything is expensive, medical care is bad and good medical products are unaffordable. In my previous letter I mentioned children searching the garbage cans. Such scenes are much more frequent today: children in the streets running around with garbage bags to look for reusable things in the waste.

The continued sanctions almost amount to the deliberate extinction of a people. The government has no solution for this situation. The black market, corruption and crime are thriving. The devil laughs up his sleeve, while the righteous watches desperately and can only cry.



Children searching garbage containers

2. The situation regarding the Corona pandemic:

The handling of the pandemic in Syria reflects the lack of medical and economic resources. There was no sufficient supply of disinfectants and masks from the beginning, let alone intensive care beds or even breathing machines. People do not know and do not want to know if they are infected or not. Even if someone is Corona positive, the person would try to hide the finding, since no one can afford losing the job, if one is lucky enough to have a job in the first place. The confined living conditions would in any case render impossible any compliance with quarantine precautions.

PCR tests are only made if one needs a certificate, mostly to leave the country. The test costs SYP 130,000 (\$ 40) and quick tests are not available for everyone. Although the vaccine is now available for free thanks to the WHO, many people are poorly informed and presumably many communities have meanwhile built up a certain herd immunity – at the price of unspeakable suffering and agonizing deaths. Undoubtedly many people have been infected and have recovered, if they were young and robust enough. There is no public vaccination pressure and there are no access controls to public buildings. The official infection numbers presumably do correctly reflect the registered cases, but where there are hardly any PCR tests performed, the official curves will logically remain flat. People have learned to deal with the latent threat of death. The fear of dying through or with the Corona virus is less frightening when the alternatives are death by some other severe untreated diseases, by starvation or freezing.

3. Children and youth:

The situation of kindergartens, schools and universities is extremely difficult, both for the



Meeting with young people

students and for the educators. Owing to the brain drain caused by emigration, there is an acute lack of qualified kindergarten pedagogues, teachers, vocational trainers and professors. The range of curricula is limited. The students complain that they cannot exploit their academic potential in Syria. They dream of studying abroad.

Many children and adolescents don't know their home country in any other condition than the

war and post-war destruction. They see with their own eyes that all reconstruction efforts are stifled by the embargo pressure. In other words, they feel punished by cold-blooded Western power politics for having been born in Syria. No big surprise that all they want is to escape the misery as quickly as possible.

I got the impression that – apart from the military and security forces – those who can today still make ends meet in Syria are especially criminals (who exploit the need of their fellow citizens, especially the plight of children and other socially weak persons), profiteers, energy retailers, smugglers, thieves, robbers and people in power positions who extort money (e.g. at check points). Leading a just and fair life is getting increasingly difficult even for those who try hard. The frequency of theft, robbery and raids has increased enormously. Very often orphans and street children are instrumentalized for such crimes. . In the vicinity of schools, one can often see drug dealers hanging around.



Meeting with catechists

4. The situation of the Church:



I was asked more often than ever before, if I know of ways to facilitate emigration to Europe through the Church. Young people have dreams of a good future abroad. Adults feel insecure and are deeply worried about the future of their children in a country where there are no perspectives. Very often, I was confronted by statements like this, "We regret very much that we did not emigrate in 2015, when the doors to Europe were open. It was a mistake that

we listened to the words of the Church, which predicted a better future and asked us to stay in Syria in order not to abandon the old and weak." Quite honestly, I had no answer to such statements and I could even understand the resentments. At the same time, I tried to continue encouraging the desperate people and asking them not to give up. "I'm sorry that I cannot help you to get to Europe. In my function as a priest I cannot do this, as in this case I would just be another agent of human trafficking. Everything I can try is to continue to help you in your misery as best as I can."

Meanwhile, the priests and pastoral workers are also at the end of their resilience. There is a dwindling understanding for the helplessness of the Church, which gradually leads to a loss of confidence. Pastoral work has become difficult. The younger people are leaving the country, the old people need care and assistance.

The priests are overburdened and helpless. With their salaries, they cannot even finance the trips for providing pastoral or terminal care. Most priests have old, defective vehicles that consume a lot of fuel and there is no budget for repairs and gasoline, let alone for the purchase of new, energy efficient vehicles.

People are looking for a ray of hope in their great need. The Christians and many Muslims look towards the Church and expect miracles.

I personally am firmly convinced that the Church can actually make miracles happen if it acts in the intention of the Lord.



5. Appeal for help and prayer:

As a priest and as a Syrian, I urgently ask you to help my suffering people. There are many ways to make a contribution.

In prayer, we will recognize the will of God and will sense his saving power. God reveals to us how to act in order to strengthen the desperate, so that they continue to hold out and don't desert the old, weak and sick. In our prayers, we should beg for the enlightenment and for the inner reflection of those who are perhaps unaware of how cruelly the morally

questionable embargo politics of the West is hitting the poorest and weakest who cannot defend themselves. I just cannot believe that the world is watching idly while witnessing that the enforcement of power political interests is accepting genocide as a form of collateral damage.

Hopefully, one or the other of you will have the opportunity of talking to decision-makers and creating an awareness of what terrible harm is being done here and thus causing a rethinking before it is too late and a whole people is extinguished through hunger, deprivation and illness.

To alleviate the acute hardship, any financial and material help is urgently needed. Every single Euro which you can spare will contribute to purchasing items for survival packages of food and other urgently needed everyday goods, helping people with basic medicine, or supporting rental and heating costs.

Donations are also needed for the planned social market and for a soup kitchen, which will be set up as two additional floors above the "Bakery of Grace". With God's help, this regional bakery was put into operation in the Christian village of Maarouneh near Damascus in June 2020, in the middle of the Corona crisis. For providing the planned flat roof of the building with photovoltaic panels, we have fortunately the support of a far-sighted Christian organization that will contribute most of the financing of this efficient and environmentally friendly source of energy, which will supply the large bakery and the entire building.

Another project that is close to my heart is called "Light for Syria". Bringing light to the Syrian population during this time of Advent would be particularly meaningful. Owing to the serious lack of energy, there are very many unlit streets and places. On the one hand, this darkness poses a threat to the safety of women and girls and on the other hand it leads to frequent stumbling and injuries. With the "Light for Syria" project we want to illuminate a number of villages with solar lamps along the main roads leading to the schools and churches. The solar lamps moreover constitute a particularly sustainable and environmentally friendly form of support.

Perhaps some families and groups of friends will take up the following special Christmas idea of giving presents to those who have nothing at all, instead of spending money on the usual type of expensive presents that would only increase the already existing over-saturation with material goods. I personally think that giving presents to our dear ones is indeed important. However, a person close to us may already have more than enough in material terms and might appreciate an immaterial present consisting of quality time spent together, of personal attention and dedication. In any case, a donation for the suffering people in Syria would be a gift the usefulness of which you don't need to have any doubts about. You can be sure about the deep gratitude of the recipients. This gratitude reflects the relief of getting a warm meal, heating the room to a cosy temperature, or buying a necessary medicine.

I convey my heartfelt thanks to you in advance and wish you a peaceful Advent season and a blessed Christmas time. Take care of yourself and your loved ones and stay healthy in the coming year 2022.

United with you in prayer,

Your Fr. Hanna Ghoneim

Vienna, December 6, 2021