

Dear friends and supporters of Korbgemeinschaft,

The news here in Europe is dominated by shocking images from Ukraine and Gaza. We hardly hear anything about Syria in the media these days. There is only occasional mention of Israeli airstrikes on Iranian Revolutionary Guards, with hardly any light being shed on the consequences for the Syrian civilian population. Unfortunately, this does not mean that the situation in Syria has noticeably improved. Military fighting has been largely reduced, but there is still a lot of political tension, the economic situation is deteriorating more and more drastically and recovery is not in sight. The humanitarian situation is actually worse now than it was during the war because the deprivations have been going on for so long. I would now like to talk about the desperate situation of people from my perspective.

The main reason for the economic misery is the embargo that is still in force (despite repeated attempts by well-informed, humanitarian circles to bring about an end to it), but also the domestic policy, which does not find satisfactory solutions for social welfare and security. In addition, the support from aid organizations is far from sufficient. The pressure on the civilian population is increasing and the only thing left for people is to keep hoping for a miracle.

There were three things that particularly caught my attention and that I would therefore like to share with you:

1. Too cold, far too little energy for heating

The first thing I noticed when I visited Syria from late January to early February, was how terribly cold it was everywhere in people's homes. This lack of warmth leads to many illnesses. I felt an increasingly sore throat starting on the third day of my visit and I subsequently developed pneumonia. Many people have no way of heating their



homes and moreover the buildings are poorly insulated. The public buildings of authorities, schools, etc. are likewise hardly heated. When it is very cold, schools are closed because they do not have enough heating material. What I cannot understand is the fact that energy prices continue to rise even though the dollar rate recently dropped by 7.3 %.



2. Everything is becoming more expensive and people are dropping into dire poverty

The second thing I noticed was that the prices of many products of daily need keep increasing abruptly. The price increase can sometimes be up to 100% within one day. During my latest visit, the price of bread increased by 100%; before that, the same thing happened with the prices of medicines, Internet, electricity, etc. By way of compensation, the salaries of public

employees (but not those in the private sector) were increased by 50%. An average monthly salary for a public employee is currently the equivalent of EUR 20.

Since energy prices continue to rise despite the falling dollar rate, food, transportation, etc. automatically become more expensive. The dollar rate used to be the benchmark for the increase in the prices of food and other goods. Today, energy prices are the cause of price increases. The question is who exercises control of the fuel supply. The rising energy prices, especially gasoline and diesel, are driving people to desperate steps. Mobility is becoming more difficult, unemployment is increasing, people are becoming increasingly impoverished and without income they are facing starvation. In short, life is becoming more and more unbearable. These grievances are a breeding ground for corruption, abuse, exploitation, crime, illegal business, the black market and similar social ills. There is no longer any trust in the local currency and trading in foreign currencies is strictly prohibited and punishable.

The impoverishment of families leads to ever more misery and moral destabilization. Those families who do not have any relatives abroad to receive occasional support are suffering most severely.

What I don't understand is the fact that, despite this drastic impoverishment, the World Food Program stopped aid to millions of people in Syria earlier this year. This also resulted in more than 9,000 connected jobs in Syria being cut. The government is increasingly tightening the guidelines regarding eligibility for subsidized foods such as bread, sugar, rice and sunflower oil, thus excluding ever more poor people and families. Many aid organizations, including church-related ones, are reducing their aid programs due to a lack of available funds.

In this desperate situation, emigration is the only way out for many Syrians. This step has also become increasingly difficult and costly. In Aleppo, about 60 Christian families left their homes within one month before last Christmas. Even priests are leaving their parishes and seeking asylum abroad. I know seven of them.

3. Lack of reconstruction

The third thing that anyone will notice en route between cities, especially between Latakia and Aleppo, are the numerous houses lying in ruins for many kilometers. In addition to the damage caused by the war, there is additional damage from the earthquakes. And there is no visible reconstruction anywhere. I wonder where all the people are, who lived in these homes. There are certainly millions of fates connected to these ruins. People have long dreamed of returning to their homes. Unfortunately, the fulfilment of this wish keeps vanishing into the remote future. People are constantly looking for a glimmer of hope for a better life and are constantly faced with setbacks and disappointments.



Is there still hope for a better life?

Everything suggests that life in Syria is becoming increasingly difficult. The question that arises and that concerns everyone: Is there still hope for a better life in Syria and for reconstruction?

As a Christian and as a priest, I firmly believe that there is always hope, as this hope is a gift from God, who wants life for all people. But the real question is: WHERE do I find hope? Certainly not in politics, nor in the economy, and certainly not among the price drivers in the oil business. I put my hope in the inexhaustible grace of God, which is given to us every day because God loves us.

I would now like to tell you specifically about the hope that I cherish. In my previous newsletter just before Christmas, I talked about socially engaged, Christian-minded youth groups in Aleppo, Latakia and Homs. During my latest visit to Syria I again had the opportunity to meet with the group in Aleppo and with that in Latakia.



Handover of a wheelchair for a handicapped man

The young people told me about their activities for people in need, but also about their own wishes and necessities. Thanks to the funds they received via *Korbgemeinschaft* for organizing Christmas presents and food packages as well as financial support for families in need, the young helpers were able to bring a lot of joy to others and thereby they also experienced joy in their own hearts. I want to extend a special thank you to everyone who sent us donations for our Christmas projects.

The voluntary youth groups also continually receive humanitarian goods which we send to Syria in containers, as well as financial means for their charitable actions. Recently, many communities in other cities have expressed interest in setting up similar groups in Damascus and the surrounding area, in the Valley of Christians, in Saddad, Homs and Rableh (surroundings of Homs). Numerous young people are willing to engage in charitable activities.



Meeting with the group in Latakia



Group of helpers in Aleppo

What nourishes hope and confidence in me, the team of *Korbgemeinschaft* and the youth groups in Syria, is the support from the part of many friends here in Austria as well as in Germany, Hungary, Sweden and Switzerland who regularly collect relief supplies and/or donations. Not to forget the many aid organizations which render our projects possible. I call all of this "grace", a gift from God that works for the benefit of those in need in Syria.



Preparation of candles for Palm Sunday

I still put a lot of hope in the enormous strength of women in society. *Korbgemeinschaft* tries to combine and coordinate the blessing expressed through the willingness to donate in the West with the charitable energy of helpers in Syria.

I think that committed young people in particular deserve to be given a chance to fulfill their role in rebuilding society.

Reconstruction must first and foremost take place in the hearts and in the heads, i.e. spiritually and mentally. This requires positively motivated people. If they think and act in a Christian way, they can achieve miracles, – this is my firm conviction.



Bakery of Grace

The example of the “Bakery of Grace” shows the power of the Christian spirit. Despite all the difficulties, the bakery is still functioning. Indeed it gives hope and confidence to hundreds of families. Many people, including those living in neighbouring villages, are incredibly grateful for receiving good bread at an affordable price. The bakery illustrates what Christian hands can achieve.

Christianity means love of life. Soon we will celebrate the feast of the Resurrection of Christ. Resurrection means nothing else than regaining life. Christians have life in abundance through the power of Christ, the Risen One, and can also give life, with the energy coming from God. Despite all the wars and hardships, the will to live is stronger. This is what the young people in Syria are telling me. They are ready to help and can do so if they have the necessary means. All we are asked to do is to fill their hands and thus enable them to help others. Therefore, I appeal to you – and this is the appeal of the church in Syria – not to abandon these young committed Christians.

With deep gratitude for any support given, I would like to wish you all a contemplative and grace-filled Holy Week and much joy and God's blessing for the coming Easter!

Fr. Hanna Ghoneim



Candle for Palm Sunday procession in Aleppo

Holy Week 2024