

BRINGING WARMTH TO SYRIA



EYE-CHECK: Dr Kursiah Mohd Razali (sitting, right) examining one of the refugees, with Prof Mohtar Ibrahim looking on.

In March this year, consultant ophthalmologist from Hospital Raja Permaisuri Bainun, Ipoh and MSO member Dr Kursiah Mohd Razali joined two other doctors and another two lecturers on a voluntary humanitarian mission to help Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

The mission was titled “Warmth to Syria”, and it has been coordinated by Malaysian non-governmental organisation, Haluan, since the beginning of the crisis in 2011 to give aid to Syrians living in Lebanese refugee camps.

“Most of the volunteer services include distributing food baskets, blankets and fuel for each family in the camps. The blankets are used to protect from cold temperatures and the fuel is used to generate heat from the heaters,” said Dr Kursiah.

“I feel so sad and sorry to see them in this situation. Before the war, most of the refugees were middle class citizens in Syria, and able to afford a living for themselves. Now they have been driven out of their homes and have lost most of their belongings and family members,” she said.

Over 11 million people, about half of Syria’s pre-war population, have been killed or forced to flee their homes since 2011. Some 6.3 million have been displaced internally whereas the other 5.2 million have been forced to seek safety in neighbouring countries. In Lebanon itself, one in every six people is a Syrian refugee, bringing the total to slightly over one million people. The rest are spread throughout Turkey (3.2 million), Jordan (0.65 million) and Iraq (0.24 million). (Source: MercyCorps)



A visit to one of the camps in Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. The camp is near the eastern border with Syria.

Warmth for Syria also organised for medical treatment and consultation to patients in one of the medical centres run by the local humanitarian and charitable society Al Ghawth, which is based in Beirut.

Haluan's five-person volunteer team comprised of three doctors - two ophthalmologists including Prof Mohtar Ibrahim from Hospital USM and Dr Kursiah Mohd Razali herself; Dr Siti Nor Ashiah Johari, a medical officer from the Ear, Nose and Throat department of Hospital Kangar; as well as YM Raja Azman and Ustaz Zulkifli, two lecturers from Institut Pengajian Tinggi Islam Perlis.

"Most of the camps were located near the Syrian border, some in the central region and some near Beirut. It took from one to two hours to get there from Beirut, and in some parts the road conditions were very poor," continued Dr Kursiah, relating her experience.

"The camps were densely populated and we needed a special entry permit from the local army to enter. The entrance to some of the camps were also guarded by the local army."

According to Dr Kursiah, the main difference between the patients in Malaysia and those she treated on the mission was the culture. "In Malaysia, our patients are multiracial, but in the Middle East, their tribal culture is different. We must respect aspects of that culture, and guard the privacy of their ladies."

"I am actually able to speak a little Arabic and could understand their language to a limited degree. For those who don't understand the Arabic language or if the patients speak in dialect, there are a few local hosts who are able to interpret for you."

The team collaborated with personnel from Al Ghawth, who were well versed with the current refugee situation in Lebanon, and the administrators from the humanitarian unit of Haluan, who coordinated the logistic



YM Raja Azman, buying clothes for the orphaned children.

aspects of the mission including distribution of funds.

"I was impressed with the commitment shown by our host, Al Ghawth, in helping and delivering aid to the needy refugees. They have a good working relationship with other local NGOs in Lebanon."

Other than distributing aid and free medical services, the team also helped to bring joy to the lives of the orphaned children, by taking them shopping!

"Most of these children lost their fathers during the bombing attacks in Syria or while they were escaping from the ordeal. These orphaned children rarely have the chance to go out to shop for their own clothes. By bringing them to the department store,



Prof Mohtar (in yellow jacket) delivering fuel for heat to the refugee families during the cold/winter season.

they were given the chance to choose their own clothes and this made them really happy.

"I have to contain my sad feelings and smile while trying to make them happy when delivering aid. They are wonderful people and most of them never grumble about what they are facing. They come up to us and say thank you, and even in their deprived condition, they still invited us to their house camps to have afternoon tea together!"

Through "Warmth for Syria" Haluan also organised for the sponsorship for a few of the students in schools.

"It is basic understanding for a human being to help other human beings especially in times of calamity or disaster. For a Muslim it is a good deed to help others regardless of their nation, race or religion," said Dr



Team members at the local NGO office in Tripoli, Lebanon, preparing to deliver food baskets and blankets to the refugees.



Team members together with Dr Baharuddin Suri, the head of humanitarian unit, Haluan.

Kursiah, who has been active in humanitarian relief work and a Haluan member since 2003.

Haluan was set up in 1988 and through its humanitarian unit, it has organised numerous humanitarian aid missions over the years, including to post-tsunami Aceh and Sri Lanka (2004), earthquake victims in Pakistan and Kashmir (2005), Szechuan province (2008), and Turkey (2011), as well as the Merapi volcano eruption (2010) and to Somalians fleeing the drought of 2011-2012.

“The mission made me grateful for all the blessings that I receive each day. I learned to be compassionate and help the unfortunate ones in particular the refugees. One does not have to be a millionaire in order to help. Just give and help with whatever resources that one may have,” she said about her learning experience while in the Middle East, adding that she plans to go again in the future.

HALUAN PROSTHETIC PROJECT

As a continuation to this project, Haluan is now raising funds to sponsor prosthetic limbs to the victims. They have 14 patients, some children, who need prosthetic limbs. These children were fitted with prosthesis before, however they have grown up and the previous prosthesis no longer fit their limbs, so new fittings are needed.

The cost for each prosthesis ranges from USD 1,500 to 2,000. They would like to invite good samaritans to donate and sponsor this prosthetic project through the ‘Tabung Kebajikan dan Kemanusiaan Haluan’ with Maybank account number: 5622 6350 2611. Contact Madam Fathin Athirah, humanitarian unit, Haluan at 03-89268892 (HQ).