Movements of refugees in Europe: for some time now people have been on the move, people have been even ‘on the run’. Refugees enter Europe in Greece, or Sicily, and then run as fast as they can through the Balkan routes, and as fast as they can if governments’ policies or closed borders do not slow them down.

Movements of refugees in Europe are part of a more global challenge. Movements of refugees and forced displaced people are now a structural phenomena in our globalised world. Let’s remember lives on hold due to forced migration in Central America, or the displacements of refugees in Asia around Thailand.

The newness of the so-called “refugee-crisis” in Europe does not reside in the numbers of people entering and moving along the routes; neither does it reside in concerns about border control, or registration (as in the Balkan states), or other so-called “hotspots”; and not only in setting up a humanitarian emergency response, even if concrete help is obviously needed: JRS has been responsive to these needs, with the help of numerous volunteers, and with the funds generously offered by agencies.

No, the newness of these events resides in the challenge it confronts us with, and that is to say our willingness, our capacity to build a global response to the movements.

Two questions are raised. The first: how we will be able to welcome these refugees and forcibly displaced persons in the long term? We, at JRS, we want to take this question seriously, and be concerned to build, with other partners, and especially Church or Jesuit organisations or networks, a good process of social inclusion, of integration, that will last for years.

And the second: what does it mean, for us at JRS, to accompany and serve people on the move? Some adaptation of our usual and excellent activities has to be envisaged. But the most important is to let the question be a leading question inside us, in our hearts and minds, and to seek to understand where this question actually leads us.

When something new appears, and especially when it concerns persons and human beings, we believe that the Spirit will let us know what is expected from us.

Jean-Marie Carrière
Regional Director
Helping arrivals in Croatia

After Hungary completed its barbed wire fence along its border with Serbia people travelling through the Balkans began arriving in Croatia. JRS South-East Europe (SEE) was there to provide assistance in the reception centre near Zagreb from midnight 16-17 September when the first group of forced migrants arrived.

“I received a phone call from the director of the reception centre at about 11.30pm” recalls JRS SEE director Tvrtko Barun SJ. “She asked if I could come as quickly as possible as they were expecting the arrival of hundreds of people from the border. I gathered a team of three volunteers and we went to the centre. It was fortunate that we were there to help as there were only a few volunteers already there and that would not have been enough.”

From that day on JRS in Croatia has helped hundreds of people both at the reception centre in Zagreb and at the temporary reception camp set up near the Serbian border.

In the last two weeks of September around 92,000 people crossed into Croatia from Serbia. Most passed through the Tovarnik border crossing and spent time in the temporary reception camp at Opatovac. There are Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans travelling with little more than the clothes they wear. With no other avenues open to them they have already endured terrible journeys to reach Croatia risking their lives by sea and land.

Jelena Firić, advocacy officer for JRS SEE, who is currently in the Opatovac admission centre says: “I didn’t think that there were so many children, mostly babies, amongst the refugees. It was something that surprised me. And when some of them got lost we do everything we can to help them find their family.”

JRS SEE staff are helping refugees in the camp by providing medication, handing out food, water, blankets and raincoats. As the autumn progresses the rain and the cold are going to become an important issue.

Speaking to JRS, a man from Syria said, “thank you, you have given us hope. We have been bullied, abused and robbed so many times and then we came upon Croatia. We can’t believe that we don’t have to pay for food, water, a bed... Thank you a million times, and may you all be blessed:”

In cooperation with the Croatian authorities and the Croatian Red Cross, JRS SEE is doing everything it can to keep up with the needs of refugees in a rapidly changing situation.

“There are a lot of sad stories you come across every day but none of the refugees want or need your pity, they need your help. A Syrian woman got teary-eyed when she saw my JRS vest and said that she used to volunteer for us in Syria. All she wants is to be close to her children who are in the Netherlands. All I could do is tell her I wish her good luck, give her a hug and that’s all she needed. They just need some compassion,” says Marinela Vidić-Ivoš, communications officer for JRS SEE.

To keep up-to-date with JRS SEE visit: https://www.facebook.com/JRSsee/
Take the danger out of refugee journeys

Humanitarian visas

According to UNHCR, only in 2015 to date, over 700,000 asylum seekers used highly dangerous ways to reach Europe. Some 2,500 of them died or went missing while attempting to cross the EU external borders. Without any regular channels to safely enter European territory, asylum seekers are forced to risk their lives on sea and land, paying high fees to smugglers to cross into European territory.

JRS Europe together with other Christian organisations has designed a toolbox of safe and regular measures. If these are implemented, fewer migrants will die on the road to safety. The demand for the services of people smugglers would also drop.

Among available tools advocated by JRS Europe is a system of European humanitarian visas. This measure could be a solution for people who can access European embassies or consulates in their countries of origin or at the EU external border. A humanitarian visa issued by the embassy or consulate would allow applicants to travel by regular means to European territory, where they would then file an asylum claim. It will not be an externalised asylum procedure, but rather a possibility for a protection seeker to reach the European territory in a safe and regular manner.

The change in legislation is currently possible as the EU Visa Code is undergoing an important reform. Since some Member States such as France, Ireland and Germany already have in their national laws provisions on humanitarian visas and have been using them for a long time, it is a matter of political will for other countries to follow good examples. A European humanitarian visa system will create a proper and fair framework for each country in the EU to issue humanitarian visas to those in need of protection.

Case study: Somali Olympic athlete Saamiya Yusuf Omar

21 year-old Saamiya tried to reach Europe in 2012. During 2008 she trained in Mogadishu in difficult circumstances while being harassed by local militants who did not believe that a Muslim woman should participate in sports events. Saamiya was a very promising athlete. She represented Somalia at the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing and managed a personal record of 32.16 seconds in the 200 metre sprint event, with the crowd roaring in applause.

She wished to find a coach in Italy and train in order to be able to participate in the Olympic Games in London. In 2011 she made her way to Libya, from where she boarded an overcrowded vessel. The ship sank in the Mediterranean. The need for a system which would ensure that humanitarian visas are quickly issued to persons in danger is highlighted by many personal stories such as this.
Germany

Helping the helpers

In Germany, JRS is helping the helpers: training volunteers involved in welcome initiatives and encouraging parishes and local activities through legal and practical support. Besides, JRS continues to support refugees who have been in Germany for a while, offering legal advice and visiting those in detention. Extremely important these days is advocacy.

Germany is facing a rollback in protection for certain groups with a bill of law that imposes longer waiting times in first reception facilities; gives less social assistance to migrants without a residence permit; and includes Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro in the list of “safe countries of origin”. JRS is also committed to strengthening church asylum: parishes across Germany sheltering refugees who face deportation under EU regulations to the first member state they entered.

Greece

In Athens and on Lesbos

Although only recently established, the JRS team in Greece is doing its utmost to reach out to refugees who are struggling in abysmally poor conditions until they get the chance to move north. In Athens, the team visits a detention centre in Athens and runs a centre for refugee children from seven countries. A hostel of 15 rooms to offer emergency accommodation is to open shortly.

Working in close collaboration with UNHCR to determine the areas of greatest need, and with Caritas and other NGOs, JRS is looking to send a team of volunteers to Mytilene on the island of Lesbos and to other border areas, where refugees are arriving and leaving in great numbers. Another plan is to start distributing relief items in an emergency reception centre in Athens, which is home to 2000 Afghans. To do all this, JRS Greece wants to build an international team of volunteers.

“We have Greeks and French who are volunteering and we welcome others too. If they are prepared to work in our spirit, why not?” says Maurice Joyeux SJ, director of JRS Greece.

The first edition of the new electronic newsletter will be sent out to you mid-January 2016.

If you have not previously shared your email address with us, please send it to this address: oscar.spooner@jrs.net

And you will be kept up-to-date with all our work and actions!

Please donate to support the work of JRS Europe:

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Goodbye to The Refuge!

Sign up for our new email newsletter

In January 2016 we will launch a new JRS Europe newsletter which will be delivered to our friends and supporters and many stakeholders via email.

The Refuge has contained many insightful reports and refugee voices over the years. However, after some analysis and reflection we have decided to switch from print to an electronic format.

We aim to reach a wider audience and to provide links to content on the internet in other countries that may otherwise go unnoticed.

Our paramount goal is to amplify the voices and concerns of the people we serve as loudly and clearly as possible, not only to our supporters but also to people who have the power to make decisions that affect all our lives.

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