

A light in the middle of nowhere

A UN initiative brings electric lighting to refugee camps where millions of people are living in harsh conditions

MAURICIO VICENT Madrid **27 JAN 2015 - 19:22 CET**



Kareem and his grandchildren playing chess in the Syrian refugee camp of Azraq, Jordan / S.RICH

There're some things in the well-off Western world that people take for granted: to open the faucet and see the water flowing; to be hungry and turn on the gas in order to cook something; to feel sick and go to a hospital. However, for many people in the world this is not a reality, as is the case of the 52 million people who are currently living far from their homes as a consequence of conflict, war and persecution. Among these displaced persons, there are almost 17 million of refugees, most of whom are under the protection of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the thousands of camps that the agency manage around the world. "*Many people are living in the middle of nowhere*", explains María Ángeles Siemens, CEO of the Spanish Committee of UNHCR.

"In the middle of nowhere" means that, to live in "inhospitable places where the first things we do are usually to dig wells to get water, to provide a ceiling to shelter them, food to survive and combustible to cook". Education and health care come later, but in many cases the least urgent issues, such as having electric light at night, are delayed due to imponderable humanitarian needs. And, sometimes, the consequences are terrible.

With a single solar lamp, the number of rapes decrease and children are able to study at night

“It is unbelievable how the situation of the people in the camps can change just by having light to keep on with their lives after sunset”, the aid worker **José Antonio León Barrena says from Ethiopia**. He has been working with UNHCR for more than 6 years, being destined too to Sudan, Somalia and Afghanistan. *“When night falls, refugee camps become very dangerous places due to lack of lighting. Many women suffer from sexual abuses when they go to the latrines or to take some firewood for cooking”*, Barrena explains from the UNHCR Office in Addis Abeba, where the situation of 660,000 refugees from several conflicts is being managed. *“Just with a light, the number of aggressions and rapes falls... But it’s not just about security. With a lamp, the children are able to study at night and families can get together and socialize”*, he affirms.

With the aim to alleviate this situation, as the second successive year, UNHCR and IKEA Foundation are developing a joint project to provide solar lamps and set up sustainable illumination in refugee camps. Then, for every LED bulb sold by the Swedish company all around the world from 1st February to 28th March, its foundation will grant 1 € to the project “The Power of Light”, which last year collected 7.7 million € (500,000 among the 15 shops in Spain) and benefited around 350,000 refugees in Ethiopia, Chad, Bangladesh and Jordan. “This year we expect to help 380,000 refugees in the same countries, besides Sudan”, says the Chief of UNHCR in Spain.

One of the situations we are more worried about is that of 3,800,000 Syrian refugees who in no more than two years have saturated humanitarian organizations in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. In this last country, in the Azraq camp – where in summer the temperature can reach 46 Celsius degrees – is Kareem. He’s 65 years old and since he was given a solar-charging lamp, he can teach his grandchildren to play chess inside the precarious tent where he lives with his family. *“After the war, these are the little pleasures of life”*, he says.