

Helping families survive, reaching out to a community

Funding support from the Government of Japan reaches the most desperate of refugees through the cash voucher initiative. It also helps refugees face their daily challenges and overcome their traumas of flight, through UNHCR's outreach centre in Hatay, run by its partner, a national NGO, Support to Life.

HATAY, Turkey. 13 July (UNHCR): Some walked for days. Others hid in fuel barrels, on tractors as they crossed into Turkey, keeping their children safe. All, had no choice, but to escape. Many depend as refugees, on the help given by the Turkish authorities and by UN agencies, such as UNHCR.

Iman (30), fled with her husband and five children, along with her mother and two brothers in law, two and half years ago from Idleb. The family are now in Kirikhan, Hatay. “My husband was an electrician—he was caught by the regime twice and beaten up,” she says. “Even we women were not spared. When we used to go our olive fields, soldiers would harass us. We did not feel safe.”

Hers is one of 500 families who received the cash-voucher card in Kirikhan, Hatay from UNHCR. This initiative is funded by the Government of Japan and implemented by Support to Life (STL), one of UNHCR's partners in Hatay. A total of 1,573 families (9,012 individuals) per month received the cash voucher card in the whole of Hatay province, in 2014. Each member of the family gets 45 Turkish Lire (TL)—about US\$ 18---on the card, plus 40 TL (US\$ 15) for the whole family to buy hygiene products in the month.



Tayeba with her children, outside their home. Sharifa, (extreme left of the picture) stands on one foot, leaning against the door frame. ©UNHCR/N.Bose

For Iman, this multi-purpose cash voucher card is a life-line. One of her daughters' has special dietary needs. Her husband is epileptic and it is difficult for him to find work. “I used the card to buy special food for my daughter as her bones are weak.” She uses the card primarily for food –her youngest son is an infant and needs milk and diapers.

STL have a thorough process of identifying beneficiaries who receive the cash voucher card. Their staff conduct house-to-house visits in the community, identifying those most vulnerable. Equally important, is the post distribution monitoring, to see that families who have received the card, are using it and are still in the area. This is because there is a high rate of mobility among the Syrian population and families sometimes move to a different location. STL updates their list of beneficiaries every month. Their staff is also present at the designated shops (the cards are valid at selected supermarkets/ shops) to see what the refugees are spending on.

Another family have a similar story. Tayeba (35) has seven children. Her eldest Sharifa (17) lost her foot in an explosion in Aleppo, three years ago. This was the catalyst for the family to flee, in addition to the war that “spread from village to village,” says Tayeba. “My children were small but what could I do, there was no other way out – we had to leave.”

Sharifa remembers with alarming clarity the day she lost her foot. It is a trauma that she is slowly coming out of, and she still hobbles on one foot as the family cannot afford to get her a prosthetic foot. “We were packing. A big bomb fell near my uncle’s house, which is near our house. I fell down. There was an unstable stone slab on the roof of our house, it fell on my foot, cutting it off”. She remembers exactly when she went to the village hospital, the fighting spreading, her surgery, their stay at another aunt’s house for four months, then their stay at a camp near the border, before the family were able to cross, and she was treated at a Turkish hospital. “I could not take a step” she says, prior to her treatment in Turkey. UNHCR is following up on her condition.

Like all Syrian refugees in Turkey, the family is able to access free health care and education for their children, provided by the government. However, many who live in urban areas, struggle with meeting their daily needs. The voucher card is an important source of income as Tayeba’s husband is seldom able to find work. “How can we live without it,” asks Tayeba, in genuine surprise. “I use the card to buy food for the family: sugar, vegetables, rice, oil and milk and diapers for the baby.” She can afford detergent because the card provides for this.

The Government of Japan is one of UNHCR’s most generous funders globally and provided USD four million to UNHCR’s operation in Turkey in 2014; and USD 5.6 million in 2015. In addition to the cash voucher card initiative which directly impacts the lives of refugees in a very tangible sense, Japanese funding is used for strengthening the national capacity in receiving refugees, support outreach efforts to non-camp refugees by funding community centres, providing winterization support to both camp and non-camp refugees, etc. This includes funding the community centre in Narlica run by STL, in an area of Hatay where a large number of Syrians live.



A hair-dressing class in progress, at the STL –UNHCR outreach centre in Hatay. ©UNHCR/N.Bose

45 year olds. Stress, and how to cope with it cuts across most groups. “They say ‘I don’t know how to deal with stress, how can I channel it’. I help them to cope,” says Naheed. “I encourage them to take up a hobby and highlight how they should never take it out on their children.” Watching women interacting and sharing more, coping with their depression and isolation makes Naheed grateful for what she can do to help other women. “I am proud of my achievements,” she says.

Mohammad (28) also from Idleb is a senior project officer at the STL centre. A 60-year-old Syrian man once told him that he gave him hope and a reason to live. “This is what I need to hear,” says Mohammad. “What more can I ask for? I am helping my people and this makes me feel better.”

The funding from Japan to UNHCR in Turkey reaches out to those most vulnerable, improving their lives in exile. The STL centre fills a void in the lives of the many refugees who come for counselling sessions, who come for classes and who come for vocational skills. It also gives people like Naheed and Mohammad a sense of achievement and pride, so important for their individual development.

“This is a safe place for people to come together, learn and form friendships,” says Ayse Kocak, the Community Centre Manager. “Specially for the Syrian people, it is important to have social outlets. This is a space free of judgement, people are encouraged to express themselves.” In the first quarter of 2015, the centre has reached out to 2,000 people. The target is to reach 8,700 people in the year, and they expect to comfortably exceed this number. The centre has different programs that includes among others, life-skills classes and psycho-social support.

Some 500 students are currently enrolled in life skills classes such as language courses –English and Turkish. The centre offers vocational training courses as well – sewing, hairdressing, crafts and hobbies for children.

Naheed (29) is from Idleb and works as a psychologist at the centre. She counsels women in group sessions, divided by age: 13-18 year olds, 18-25 year olds and 25-

The cash voucher cards reach families who need it most desperately. “The card to me, is the health and nutrition of my daughter and the health and well-being of all my children,” says Iman. Nothing could matter more.

The Government and people of Turkey have demonstrated commendable hospitality in receiving the nearly two million refugees in the country. With the support of the Government of Japan and other donors, UNHCR has been able to reach out to some of the most vulnerable refugees and provide much needed interventions.

By: Nayana Bose, in Hatay

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