



Zaatari camp one year on: short term gains at risk without substantial increased support

UNHCR, Amman – 29 July 2013

After only 12 months a piece of desolate Jordanian desert is now home to some 120,000 Syrian refugees.

Today, Zaatari is the second largest camp in the world – the majority those in the camp are women and children. It houses part of the total number of 507,000 refugees in Jordan - 10 folds the refugee population it had in July 2012.

Marking one year since the Zaatari camp opened is a tragic reminder of the catastrophic consequences of the Syrian crisis that has forced thousands of Syrians to flee across the border into Jordan and beyond. At the same time it is an important testament to the generosity of Jordan, and the colossal efforts that its government and people, with the support of more than 59 humanitarian organizations, have made to help shelter, assist, and protect thousands of refugees.

A year ago today, Zaatari camp opened with some 100 refugee families arriving the first night. Following a request by the Jordanian Government, UNHCR and its partners built the camp in a record time of 9 days. The camp opened when Jordanian authorities and the humanitarian community realized they were unable to cope with the then “alarming” daily rate of 100 refugees that had been crossing the border. Concerns for the seemingly high arrival rates soon faded from memory as the refugee influx into the camp reached 2,000 refugees per day.

Most of these refugees had arrived with only what they could carry on their back, and had endured horrors of Syria’s brutal conflict – not to mention exhaustion, injuries, trauma, and separation from their families. “The relentless flow posed enormous challenges to the authorities and aid organizations on the ground” said Andrew Harper, the UNHCR Representative and Humanitarian Coordinator in Jordan reflecting on the early days of the camp’s life. “Despite the difficulties, we still managed to provide food, shelter, water, sanitation, medical care, psycho social support, and register groups of hundreds of refugees at a time. Zaatari became the place where thousands of lives were saved”.

Over the last year, millions of liters of water were trucked into Zaatari, and half a million pieces of fresh bread distributed every single day. Over 120,000 refugees receive dry food rations and complementary food. In April 2013, 90,000 refugee children in the camp were immunized against measles. Mortality rates in Zaatari are much lower than those found in other large-scale emergencies or the Jordanian average level. Similarly, the number of maternal deaths in Zaatari is zero, a situation unparalleled in any other refugee emergency globally.

Since Zaatari is a mandatory point through which all Syrians arriving through Jordan’s unofficial border points must pass, it has effectively become a first point of safety, and shelter for each of the 350,000 Syrians that had entered the camp seeking protection, even if many of them continued onwards to live in urban areas.

One year on, Zaatari bears witness to the spirit of a skilled and affluent people, who through their resilience have actively contributed to development of the camp, including through the cash for work program for Syrian teachers. Today, these entrepreneurial Syrian refugees have set up over 1000 different shops in Zaatari, showing that Syrian refugees – like other refugees around the world – try to rise above their ordeal, and help themselves rather than just wait to be helped.

The achievement of saving lives however should not be cause for respite. Despite the remarkable generosity of donors, essential services that allow for a more dignified life in the camp - such as food assistance, education, a more reliable water supply system and transitional shelters - continue to be severely underfunded.

More importantly, the approximate 400,000 Syrian refugees living outside the camp in Jordan's urban areas such as Irbid, Mafraq, Zarqa, and Amman - who are often in equally, if not more desperate conditions, as those in Zaatari – should not be forgotten. Although 97% of the registered refugees receive monthly food vouchers monthly to meet their food needs, they require further assistance to pay for rent and other basic needs.

The ongoing construction of the new refugee camp in Azraq is also critical to deterring congestion in Zaatari, and ensuring a safe and adequate living space for future Syrian refugees. As the Syrian conflict worsens, it is imperative that all countries in the region continue to allow free access to those Syrians wishing to flee.

Moving forward, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, NGO partners, and the Government will continue to work on improving conditions in the camp, including the strengthening of camp management, security and community participation.

This collective effort will be made whilst not losing the hope that one day, Syrian refugees and those forcefully displaced inside Syria will be able to return in safety and in dignity to their homes and rebuild their country.

ENDS

For further information please contact:

ACTED: Byron Pakula, email: Byron.Pakula@acted.org, cel: + 962 7 98 75 47 31

Oxfam: Claire Seaward, email: CSeaward@oxfam.org.uk, cel: + 962 7 76 73 85 95

UNHCR : Ali Bibi, email: bibia@unhcr.org, cel: + 962 7 77 71 11 18

Reem Alsalem, email: alsalem@unhcr.org , cel: + 962 7 96 44 28 03

UNICEF: Marc Vergara, email: mvergara@unhcr.org, cel: + 962 7 95 76 09 64

WFP: Dina El-Kassaby, email: dina.elkassaby@wfp.org, cel: + 962 7 98 67 46 38