http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/13/world/middleeast/fleeing-warfare-syrians-find-more-misery-in-refugee-camp.html?pagewanted=all&\_r=0



**Saturday, January 12, 2013**

**A Desert Cold and Wet Multiplies the Misery of Syrian Refugees**

**Un désert froid et humide accentue la misère des réfugiés syriens**



A barefoot child walked through puddles at the Zaatari refugee camp, where about  55,000 Syrians live in hardship. A storm washed away tents last week. [More Photos »](http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2013/01/13/world/middleeast/20130113REFUGEES.html)

**Un enfant pieds nus marche dans les flaques du camp de réfugiés de Zaatari, où environ 55 000 syriens vivent difficilement. Un orage a balayé leurs tentes la semaine dernière.**

###### By [JODI RUDOREN](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/r/jodi_rudoren/index.html)

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ZAATARI, Jordan — The water has mostly been removed from hundreds of flooded tents and the dirt paths that run between them here in the region’s vastest camp of Syrian refugees. The clotheslines are laden with soggy sweaters and socks, waiting for the sun after a week of harsh wind, rain and snow.



###### The New York Times

Aid agencies expect the number of Syrian refugees to reach 1 million in 2013, and estimates for the cost of caring for them top $1 billion. [More Photos »](http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2013/01/13/world/middleeast/20130113REFUGEES.html)

The residents are waiting, too: for the next storm, and the next, that they know will come this winter and also, many fear, for their own demise.

“We were waiting for our deaths so we came out, but we found our second deaths here,” said a man who identified himself as Abu Tarik from the Dhulash family. He said he arrived in the Zaatari refugee camp 10 days ago after intense shelling near his home and farm, which lie across the border in Dara’a, [Syria](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/syria/index.html?inline=nyt-geo).

“There, we were going to die from the fires,” he said, sitting on a mat surrounded by a dozen family members. “Here we’re going to die from the cold. We don’t want to die in this tent.”

With aid agencies expecting the number of Syrian refugees to reach one million this year, and estimates for the cost of caring for them topping $1 billion, the misery in this struggling six-month-old camp is part of a deepening humanitarian crisis that threatens to destabilize the Middle East further. More than half a million people who have already fled Syria have ended up in camps and villages across Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon, all of which have asked for more international aid. Last week was the worst yet in Zaatari, as scores of tents collapsed under the most severe storm in 20 years. Two babies and a 22-year-old amputee died, all of unrelated causes. Several aid workers were injured when a riot broke out during food distribution.

Life began to return to normal on Friday, but normal in this desert camp of nine square miles crowded with more than 50,000 people is, according to the refugees and even some of those running the place, somewhere between horrible and inhumane.

Barefoot children trod through mud in temperatures not far above freezing. People lined up for hours for pots, utensils and buckets. Women pushed squeegees through the remaining puddles, and washed clothes in plastic tubs with cold water that quickly turned brown.

A young man got a $3 shave and haircut in a corrugated tin shack that a refugee barber had set up four days before. A younger one shinnied up a 30-foot light pole to pirate electricity.

“There’s no silver lining on such harsh conditions,” acknowledged Andrew Harper, the top official of the United Nations refugee agency in Jordan. “It’s just a really, really bad place to be.”

But Mr. Harper said the United Nations and the nonprofit groups helping it run the camp were doing the best with what they had, noting that the agency had appealed for $245 million to absorb Syrians regionwide in 2012 and received $157 million.  Jordan, already consumed with an intense financial crisis and a growing protest movement, is scrambling to keep up with the influx. Its task is particularly complex given the delicate balance in its population of six million, which is dominated by [Palestinian](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/p/palestinians/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) refugees and their descendants and includes hundreds of thousands who fled the war in Iraq.

Zaatari is only the most visible challenge. Nearly five times as many refugees are living in Jordanian cities and villages, taxing the government’s resources, and competing for scarce jobs.

Anmar Hmoud, who is handling the Syria file for the prime minister, said that refugees could leave Zaatari and Jordan’s handful of smaller camps if a relative or friend could guarantee financial support, but that the government was “exhausting its own resources.” He estimated the cost of military, health, education and other services at $670 million for 2012 and 2013.

“We are a neighbor, and we do our duty, but there is a limit to helping people unless we are helped by others,” he said. “It’s not the Jordanian problem, it is the international community’s problem.”

Some relief is coming. Mr. Hmoud said a new camp just south of here near Zarqa, financed by the United Arab Emirates, would open in two weeks, allowing 6,000 of Zaatari’s most vulnerable residents to move into prefabricated homes, and eventually growing to accommodate 30,000. Saudi Arabia, which over the past month has provided Zaatari with 2,500 prefabs costing $8 million, announced Friday that it would give $10 million more to the Jordanian effort. Mr. Harper said he had met with envoys from Qatar and the Emirates.

“It’s terrible to say, but sometimes it takes a miserable situation like we’re having now to get people to say, ‘Yes, we can do something,’ ” Mr. Harper said.

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Not soon enough for Iman Qardah, 30, who has been in the camp for 10 weeks with her five children, ages 1 to 10. When the storm struck last week, her husband spent the night hammering the stakes of the tent as the wind threatened to rip it from the ground. The next night, rain seeped inside, so the family slept piled on one side. The next, the tent “started swimming on the water,” she recalled, and finally collapsed. “My husband started shouting in the street for someone to help.”

The family moved to a prefab that is perhaps 10 feet by 20 feet. But they leak, too. On Friday, the children huddled for warmth around a gas burner where Ms. Qardah was simmering cauliflower and rice, as a bucket nearby caught drops from the ceiling. A neighbor poked a head in, wondering jealously how she had procured a space heater.

“Every day I’m thinner than the day before and my mind is more preoccupied,” Ms. Qardah said as she nursed the baby. “I used to not sleep because of the missiles. Now I don’t sleep because I’m worried about my kids constantly.”

The camp is rife with complaints. Skimpy food rations, scarce clothes. Spotty electricity, rare hot water, squalid toilets. Suspicions that aid workers are stealing blankets. Nothing to do, no prospects for getting out.

But given the weather and the continued flood of refugees — about 10,000 had arrived in the camp in the past 10 days — it is remarkable things are not much, much worse. Officials said there had been no casualties from the cold. Khaled al-Hariri, the 22-year-old who was described in a YouTube video posted Wednesday by a Syrian activist as “the martyr to negligence and cold,” actually died of cancer in a nearby hospital, according to a spokesman for the World Health Organization. There was also a stillbirth and a premature baby who died after three days in an incubator.

Anne, the doctor at the French military clinic here, which requires personnel to be identified only by first name, said she had seen a slight uptick in sore throats and ears since the storm, but no frostbite. The main change is that patients linger in the consultation tent to stay out of the cold.

The French have performed 192 surgical operations on war wounded in the camp. An organization called Gynecologists Without Borders has delivered 172 babies here, 46 in the last three weeks.

Yusef Mohamed Hasan was at the clinic on Friday holding Sham, who was born Dec. 12 by Caesarean section. She was swaddled in four layers, then cradled in a big fuzzy blanket as her mother had the stitches removed.

“As soon as my wife is O.K., we are going back,” said Mr. Hasan, 44. “It’s not better for me there; it’s not safe. But it’s humiliating here.”

Talk of returning to Syria has increased as conditions have deteriorated, but officials said there had been no marked change in the number heading back across the border. Most are resigned to remaining through the winter, or longer.

As the sun came out Friday, Aboud Mohamed Awad and three neighbors set about building themselves a bathroom. The storm made walking to the shared facilities unbearable, he said, and anyhow they are filthy and crowded. Mr. Harper of the United Nations said the goal was to have one toilet per 20 refugees, but that the reality right now was more like one to 50.

Mr. Awad said he used the profits selling the ground floor of his home in Syria to buy corrugated panels and wood for about $100 and hired a $1.50-an-hour laborer, who started by smoothing cement with a pie plate to create a floor.

“We can at least take care of certain things,” Mr. Awad said with something like pride. “We have young girls. It will make us feel more like people.”

*Ranya Kadri contributed reporting*.