

## Reaching out along the western borders, counselling and helping refugees cope

Turkey is the largest refugee hosting country in the world with more than 2.9 million refugees in country, of which 2.7 million are Syrian. Only 10% live in camps, the rest make a life in cities, towns and villages. To strengthen community based protection, UNHCR increased its outreach to urban refugees by expanding partners presence in cities hosting large numbers of refugees and increasing its outreach missions. Under this initiative, it created 19 new partner offices country-wide in 2015, out of which 17 were funded by the European Union. These offices provide much needed counselling, support, relief and above all, protection to refugees.



*The open fields behind Ortacay village, that some refugees live in, close to lemon and orange orchards.*

IZMIR, MUGLA, ORTACAY, FETHIYE Turkey. 26 February (UNHCR): It had rained heavily the night before and for the 15 families who live in makeshift tents in Ortacay, a village near Mugla, life had just got a bit harder. It was cold and windy and children scarcely had enough warm clothes. The team from the Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (ASAM), UNHCR's partner in Mugla arrived with family size blankets, hygiene kits and baby hygiene kits. It was their first interaction with this group of 75 Syrian refugees who live out of camps in a rural area, making their living by working in the lemon and orange orchards over the summer months. There are about 700 refugees who live in the village of Ortacay –it's a small fraction who live out in the fields.

“Everything is so useful,” says Abu (50), hurriedly opening the hygiene packet, taking out the shampoo, soap, toothpaste. He was specially happy with the hygiene packet for babies “I have a grand daughter who is just six months old, the baby powder, diapers are very welcome.” He has six daughters and is here with all of them and his wife. They fled the war in Aleppo nine months ago and chose to live in these open fields, behind the village of Ortacay. “I feel free here and I can work in the orchards and earn for my family,” explaining his rationale for choosing to stay under makeshift plastic sheets rather than go to the available camps.

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*Isa receiving the family blankets from ASAM staff. UNHCR/N.Bose*

Isa (35) and his family of six children and his wife who is now pregnant with their seventh child, also from Aleppo, live in the same open fields. He was delighted with the blankets and the hygiene packet. “We don't have money to buy any of this,” he says. “Our work in the fields is only in the summer. I will share this with my relatives,” he says opening the packet in front of us. “Everything is of good quality and we really needed the towels,” he says smiling.

More than the shampoos and blankets and baby packs they received, it was the contact with ASAM and UNHCR that they valued the most. “I am so happy to meet you,” says Abu. “I will take your phone numbers and call you if we have a problem. Thank you so much.” Agreeing, Isa adds: “This is the first time I meet anyone from ASAM and UNHCR.

Thank you, we are happy you brought this.”

The ASAM office in Mugla opened a few months ago, in September 2015, funded by the European Union under its project on *Development of Protection Strategies for Persons in Need of International Protection in the Urban Context*. It is one of 41 UNHCR partner offices operating in urban areas, of which 19 were opened in 2015, in an effort by UNHCR and its partners to strengthen community based protection to refugees and asylum-seekers living across the country. An important part of its work is outreach, counselling on social and legal issues, psycho-social support and networking with the local authorities to better protect refugees.



Susan (on the extreme left of the picture), with her uncle and aunt and her cousins in Fethiye. ©UNHCR/N.Bose

Susan (37), used to be an accountant in Damascus but was forced to flee five months ago. “The situation in Syria is very hard, life is very difficult. All our houses are destroyed and my cousin’s husband was kidnapped twice,” she explains. She lives in Fethiye now and is looking for a job.

“I can’t find a job because I don’t speak Turkish,” says Susan. But the family are keen to learn. With the help of the ASAM Mugla office, they were able to locate a Turkish language class for adults in a government run centre of education. But the fee was 150TL (US \$ 50 ) each and they couldn’t afford it. “We don’t have the money to learn Turkish, we told them that,” says Susan. It was after an intervention made by ASAM, that the centre agreed to waive the fees for Syrian refugees, including Susan and her cousins. “I hope to find a job in accounting and carry on with my career,” says Susan with a smile. “I want to live and work in Turkey, I love it here and it is so beautiful.”

Another new ASAM office, funded by the same EU project opened in Izmir in October, 2015. UNHCR’s mobile team there works closely with the ASAM staff as well. Here, the refugees are not just Syrian – many Afghans, Iraqi and Iranians live in this area and benefit from the counselling provided by ASAM staff in particular concerning the dangers of attempting illegal sea crossings and the rights to which they are entitled to in Turkey. It is a life line that many hold onto, as they battle the traumas they left behind.

Ahmed\* (27) fidgets with his left hand, trying to hide the stubs that remain of two of his fingers. He’s from Afghanistan and used to work as a government officer during the elections. In a brutal incident in April 2014, a group of government staff on their way back from the polling station were attacked and had their fingers cut off as they had dared to vote. Ahmed was one of those.

But that is in the past now. He came to Izmir a month ago and is at the ASAM office, desperately looking for some solace as his sister-in-law, who is just nine years old, battles severe burn injuries in an Izmir hospital. His other sister-in-law, who is fourteen, is in the burns ward. His wife, four months pregnant with their second child, spends all her time at the hospital, caring for her sisters. Their mother died, drowned off the coast of Izmir, when they –Ahmed, his wife, his 10 month old son, two of his sisters in law and his mother-in-law—tried to cross to an island in Greece on a stormy January night.

“We were forced at gun point by three men to get onto the boat. The weather was so bad, we didn’t want to get out of the bus. We were 65 people and just one small boat. They had said there would be two boats. They kicked me to get on,” says Ahmed recounting that night of horror. “The sea was rough, and the boat started to swallow the water. People began pushing. My son was in my arms and I held on to my nine-year old sister in law. My mother-in-law , my wife and my other sister in law were pushed away from me.” He can’t remember the moment exactly when his mother-in-law was pushed into the water, but he does remember how helpless he was to stop that. As the boat sank, the hot engine oil flowed into the water burning those nearby. “About 12 people were injured –my sisters in law, my wife as well. Two people died, my mother-in-law and a baby.” He remembers the moment when the Turkish coast guard rescued them and says simply “when I saw them, I knew I would live again.”

ASAM and UNHCR staff visited those in hospital and shared their contact details and that is how Ahmed was able to call ASAM for help. He needed a place to stay, he needed to register, he needed counselling. “Many thanks to you all,” he says. “ASAM helped us to register with UNHCR –we couldn’t go to Ankara, they helped us to fill the forms in the hospital. They tell me now about the kinds of jobs I could do, they visit my sisters-in-law who are in a bad psychological state. I appreciate all that,” he says clearly grateful that he had somewhere to turn to.

Merve (26), the young social counsellor in the ASAM Izmir office says that most of the refugees she deals with are Iranian and Iraqi. “Many of them are victims of torture, domestic violence and rape. Among Iraqis, trauma is a common problem as they were forced to leave because of war and find it difficult to adapt.” She also counsels people like Ahmed and children who survive these boats sinking. “It is specially difficult for children –they regress after an experience like that,” she says. Like the other staff in the ASAM Izmir office, she feels she is making a difference in people’s lives. “They come to me again and again, and I am glad that I am able to help. They feel lighter after talking to me,” she says.



Gulnar\* welcomes us into a block of apartments in Izmir, where she was visiting her cousin for a few days.  
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Another person who has been able to cope because of the counselling she’s received from ASAM staff in Izmir, is Gulnar\* (50), from Iran. Divorced and a mother of three, she came to Izmir a year ago, leaving her children behind. “I was forced to marry when I was fourteen,” she says. “My family and my ex-husband’s family are very religious. They forced me to stay married for so long and I couldn’t do anything of my own free will. A man can hit his wife and she has to stay silent?” she asks, incredulous that she stayed married for nearly 15 years before she had the courage to leave.

But coping alone in a new country is not easy. She lives in various friends’ homes, as she cannot afford to pay rent. It is also difficult to find work. And, like any mother would, she misses her children terribly. “They are 34, 32 and 27 now, and we stay in touch over the internet,” she says, breaking down. She’s been to the ASAM office twice and talking about her problems has helped her pick up the threads of her life, slowly. “We talked about my life in Iran, and my children. I cried through the session, I missed my children so much,” she says. She knows she will never see them again.

In addition to the much needed presence and outreach in the field to counsel and inform persons on the move, seven of these offices that are located in coastal areas such as Balıkesir, Canakkale, Edirne, Izmir, Mersin, Mugla, Bursa have also helped deliver emergency humanitarian aid to those who are rescued on the seas by the Turkish Coast Guard, police and Gendarmerie. UNHCR has provided some 10,265 food packs, 3,200 anoraks, 11,100 pairs of thermal socks, 430 sets of thermal clothes and 1,760 thermal blankets that have been handed over to the authorities for those they bring safely back to Turkish shores.

All 17 ASAM offices funded by the EU under this project –the other ten are located in Kirklareli, Hatay, Kilis, Mardin, Malatya, Sanliurfa, Erzurum, Kahramanmaras, Van and Adana—work closely with UNHCR playing a vital role in protecting refugees through counselling on legal and social issues, psycho social support and by building networks and links with the local authorities and other NGOs to help find solutions to assist those in need so they can have better lives in Turkey.

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the EU has provided over USD 25 million to UNHCR Turkey for the protection and assistance of all refugees and asylum-seekers, and both parties are developing new proposals to further strengthen the partnership.

Turkey is the largest refugee hosting country in the world now, with 2.9 million refugees in country, of which 2.7 million are Syrian. The government is generous in providing access to education, health care, and the right to work. A staggering 90% of Syrian refugees and all Afghan, Iranian and almost all Iraqi refugees live in urban areas. Given that the challenges of reaching out to an urban population are many, this EU funded project is a vital step in establishing a presence and an outreach in the field. UNHCR remains grateful to all its donors who support refugees in Turkey and in this case, the European Union for helping reach a vulnerable and scattered population of urban refugees, whose numbers continue to increase.

*\*names have been changed for protection reasons*

By: *Nayana Bose, in Izmir, Mugla, Ortacay and Fethiye.*

*Next month: Focus on the support by the Big Heart Campaign, to refugees in Turkey supported by H.H Sheikhha Jawaher Bint Mohammed Al Qasimi of the UAE*

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