



Helping Syrian refugees cope with the harsh winter

Nearly 135,000 urban refugees received winterization assistance from UNHCR. Of this, 65,000 received a winterization package of blankets, anoraks, thermal underwear, winter boots; 70,000 received an E-cash voucher worth US\$ 200 per family to help cope with increased needs over the winter months. This and more, is made possible by the generous support of the Government of the United States to refugees in Turkey.



Iman at the distribution point in Siverek, collecting the winterization assistance from ASAM and UNHCR. © UNHCR/N.Bose

Siverek three years ago—she has six children, the oldest is four. Her husband has a problem with his spine and cannot work anymore – he used to work as daily labourer. At home, her children rip open the bags, delighted, as was Iman, with their contents. “My children have no anoraks or thermals. I am so happy to get these, and the blankets,” she says with a smile. “The boots for the children are very good,” she says looking at Zainab who won’t let go of her little red ones.

Mahir (36), also from Al-Hasakah has a family of five to feed. His wife, Khadija (34) and three children, the youngest is a baby, just a year old. “We had to leave because of the bombings, and I had no job during the war. We had no choice,” says Mahir. Sadly, a medical condition with his legs prevents him from



working anymore –the family depend on relatives, particularly his sister who is working, and other support. Khadija and the children wait for him to return from the distribution centre. And eagerly begin opening the bags. “I know there are blankets, anoraks, thermals and boots,” says Mahir. “And the boots are specially useful for our children to keep them warm.” His wife is equally pleased. “We get this just at the right time,” she says, happily. “It is so cold and we don’t have money to buy any of this! We have a baby and

At home in Siverek, Mahir and Khadija look on as their daughter tries on the new anorak; their little son is already holding on to his red boots. © UNHCR/N.Bose

SIVEREK, HILVAN, GAZIANTEP, SURUC, ISTANBUL, Turkey. 28 January (UNHCR): It is a bone chilling -2 degrees centigrade in Siverek, a small town about an hour away from Sanliurfa, enroute to Diyarbakir, in south eastern Turkey. The gusty winds don’t help either. But none of this deterred a group of Syrian refugees, patiently waiting to receive their blankets, anoraks, thermals and winter boots from a distribution point arranged by UNHCR’s partner, the Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (ASAM) and the local authorities.

Iman (38) was there with one of her daughters, to collect their share. Originally from Al-Hasakah, they came to



Iman’s daughter Zainab happily opens the packet in their home. © UNHCR/N.Bose

there is so much he needs,” she says, distracted now by her daughter putting on her new anorak.

It is always a challenge to reach out to urban refugees, living in towns and rural areas, who are in need. ASAM has a thorough procedure of assessment and in Siverek, more than 700 families were assessed to see which ones were in need, and 498 were selected, including Iman and Mahir, to receive winterization assistance. In neighbouring Hilvan, a village about half an hour way, 126 families were given winterization assistance, through ASAM.



In their room in Hilvan, Mohammad using the blanket to cover himself; Mayada is wearing the anorak and two of their sons show off their new boots. © UNHCR/N.Bose

helping us, may God bless and keep them safe.” Five year old Faruk adds: “My jacket is black and I have already worn it many times. But I want pants, as well!”



Khan and Khalida pose proudly with their sons, in their new anoraks outside their home in Hilvan. © UNHCR/N.Bose

Mayada (38) has an invalid husband, Mohammad (70) and five children. Talkative and cheerful, she is his second wife. Her eldest daughter is 20, and her youngest, a boy is just five. They have a one year old grand daughter and the family all live together in two rooms, in a small side street of Hilvan. They came from Al-Raqqah a year and a half ago. “We left because of the war,” says Mohammad. “Soldiers –and I don’t know if they were from the regime or opposition—came to our houses and told us to leave. They said we would die if we stayed.”

A motorbike accident he had 20 years ago has left him bedridden. Mayada doesn’t have a regular job. “I go sometimes to Harran, with my daughters to pick fruit from the farms,” she says. Grateful for the blankets, thermals, anoraks and boots they have received, she says that they could not afford to buy any of this, as all their money goes towards rent. “This will keep us warm and I give special thanks to the people

Down the road, Khan (46) is the head of a large family of seven children and his wife. The brick house has two rooms. Four of his sons are mentally challenged –the eldest of his children is 27, the youngest, 20. None are married. His wife, Khalida (46) looks tired—caring for so many is not easy. The family is from Kobane, and they walked to the border. “The bombs destroyed all homes, including ours. There is nothing left, no house, no yard. We couldn’t even take anything with us, we just about saved our lives,” she says. “Everything in this house, the carpets, and pillows to sit, are given by our Turkish neighbours. We had nothing.”

This is a family that is thrilled with what they have received. They posed proudly for a photograph in their new anoraks. “The blankets are very warm and we are already wearing our thermals and anoraks and the boots keep us warm. The quality is so good,” says Khalida. “We got

enough for everyone in our family," says Khan. "And ours is a large family. We could not have bought a single thing and if we didn't receive this, we would be very cold this winter. Thank you for keeping us warm."

The total amount spent on winterization assistance to urban refugees only is approximately US\$ 6 million, including the US \$ 3 million spent on the E-cash vouchers, made possible, by generous funding from various donors, including the Government of the United States. As a long-term strategic partner for UNHCR, the Government of the United States has contributed with a substantial amount of USD 44.9 million to UNHCR in 2015 to assist the Syrian refugees in Turkey.



Dilmiran, looking for the best bargains in an Istanbul super market as she uses the E-cash voucher. ©UNHCR/Y.Sezgin

Through its partners ASAM and CONCERN, UNHCR was able to reach and assist nearly 135,000 out of camp refugees. Some 65,000 refugees who live in rural areas received a winter assistance package that consists of high-thermal blankets, anoraks, thermals and winter boots; and 70,000 refugees who live in urban areas received E-cash vouchers. The voucher is a new initiative this year, for families in cities and towns, in lieu of a winter package as the voucher enables them to cover their increased needs over the harsh winter months. Worth 600TL (US \$ 200) per family, refugees were able to use the vouchers at designated outlets in their cities and towns.

Out of camp refugees who receive the E-cash voucher have a choice on how to spend this. In Suruc town, the E-cash vouchers were distributed by CONCERN. The families receive the total amount in two instalments. There are designated outlets where the vouchers are valid and can be used to buy winter clothes, boots, blankets, food and furniture. Adnan (42) is from Kobane and came to Suruc in 2014—they are a family of 14, including nine children. They live free of charge in two rooms given to them by a local resident of Suruc, and this is a stroke of luck as Adnan finds it difficult to find work. He's used the voucher to provide the basics for his family: sugar, flour, rice, oil, and vegetables to cook proper food for the children. "The local people tried their best to support us for a long time, shared their limited resources with us; but they are all exhausted. Without this cash assistance, we would not survive the winter and I would have to leave my young family behind to look for a job to make money in other provinces. We all are so thankful to those who are helping us with this cash," he says, clearly grateful.

In Istanbul, Fettah (47) and his wife Dilmiran (42) went shopping with their E-cash vouchers. They have seven children, ranging from the ages of 20 to three. Originally from Qamishli, they came to Istanbul three years ago. "Our house was destroyed," says Halit, 19, one of the boys. "We had no access to water or food. Our school was demolished." Fettah used to work as a painter in Syria and for a while, worked as a waiter in tea shop in Istanbul. "We have nothing and were praying for help," he says. "We are very happy with what you given us." The family bought rice, bulgur, olives, milk and diapers and a few other things that the children needed. "If we didn't have this card, we would have to borrow money to survive," says Dilmiran. "We have so many children and only one has a job. My husband can only find work time to time."



Sabah picking fruits for the family with the E-cash voucher in Istanbul. ©UNHCR/Y.Sezgin

Another family in Istanbul, Yusuf (45) and his wife Sabah (43) joined Fettah and Dilmiran when they went to buy essentials with the E-cash voucher. "We used to live in Aleppo," says Sabah "till our house was bombed." They are a family of seven including five children ranging from ages of 19 to four and came to Istanbul two years ago. Yusuf used to be a shoe maker in Aleppo and says that the E-cash voucher came just at the right time. Two of his sons are working, he is unwell and unable to provide for the family.

"The priority is to provide the children with milk and diapers. After those, cleaning supplies and detergents are needed. Since we are a family, we need different types of things. We have had run out of nearly everything in our house, so thank you very much for the vouchers. The children were saying yesterday that we ran out of sugar. And then we went to receive the card and could provide for our needs," says Sabah. Her eight year old son Aya looks up and asks what she got him. "Chocolate," says Sabah with a smile. Aya's

smile was wider than his mother's.

In another city, Gaziantep, a crowd gathers outside the UNHCR community centre run by IMC/ASAM as the E-cash voucher distribution continues for a fourth day. The Centre is distributing e-vouchers to a total of 1,338 households. Necvah (35) sits with her 15-day old baby, Sham, at the Centre. Originally from Aleppo, she lives in Gaziantep with her husband and six children, her eldest is 13 years old. “We arrived a year and a half ago with only the clothes we were wearing and a very small bag of belongings. At the beginning, we had no savings at all, it was very bad! Our Turkish neighbours helped us a lot,” she says. “Then, when my husband started working and my son was working in the summer, we managed to save a bit of money.” Her husband does not have a regular job now and recently had an operation on his back. He can work only part-time. With the voucher, the family will buy food. “This is our biggest need. We will buy proper food, but of course, we need things for the baby like diapers,” says Necvah.



Zeynep receiving her E-cash voucher at the community centre in Gaziantep. ©UNHCR/K.Porteous

Also from Aleppo, Zeynep (31) waits to get her E-cash voucher. She lives in Gaziantep with her husband, her mother and her six children. “We left three years ago. There was a massive bombing attack very close by, and also men firing from a field close to our house. We knew we had to leave, we were very scared,” she says. “My home here is small and cramped compared to our house in the outskirts of Aleppo. Our old house is still there, but the walls and roof badly damaged.” Pleased with the card, she said she would spend it mainly on food. “I want to buy food. If I did not have this card I would have to go to the smaller shops in Gaziantep and take a loan from the shopkeeper. I do this often and so do my friends – sometimes we simply do not have enough money until my husband gets paid, so we loan small amounts (100TL—US \$ 33), to at least allow us to buy some food.” With the card, Zeynep bought rice, sugar and washing powder.

UNHCR, supported by donors and this case, the Government of the United States has been able to reach out to those most in need.

Turkey cares for more than 2.5 million Syrian refugees allowing them access to work, education and health care. Those in the camps are provided with shelter, food, there are schools for the children and primary health care centres. Refugees appreciate also that they live in a country where they feel secure.

“Our Turkish neighbours have helped us to pick up the pieces of our lives,” says Mohammad. “I feel safe in Turkey. Nobody threatens us and I can live with my family in peace.” His wife, Mayada agrees but adds that she misses Al-Raqqah. “Specially my home, our neighbours, our relatives, our friends.”

For Khadija the freedom she has in Siverek is a blessing. “I feel safe and free in Turkey,” she says. “I go out alone. It’s a wonderful feeling!”

“I am happy in Turkey,” says Khalida. “We can work here and the government and the country protects us.” But there is a desperate hope that the war will end, that a day will come when they and every other Syrian refugee can go back. “Syria is our home,” says her husband Khan. “Someday, I want to return.”

By: Nayana Bose, in Hilvan and Siverek (villages/towns around Urfa); Yazgulu Sezgin in Istanbul; Kathryn Porteous in Gaziantep and Gonca Savas in Suruc.

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