

**Refugees in the desert. Visit in Al-Zaatari refugee camp/ Jordan, 3.10.2012**

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On October 3rd, 2012, I visited the Al-Zaatari refugee camp near Mafraq, Jordan, some 80 km north of Amman and only 6 kilometres south of the Syrian border. The visit was organized by our Jordanian Partner, the Arab Women Organization (AWO), who considers providing counselling services for traumatized refugees in the Camp.

Upon entering the camp, the grave living conditions, which have led to tensions in the Camp, are obvious immediately. Al-Zaatari was established only in July 2012 and still lacks basic services. It consists of endless rows of tents on the dusty desert ground, leaving refugees who just escaped the horrors of the Syrian civil war unprotected to the heat and sand; a section covered with gravel is considered almost a luxury.

Basic medical services are provided, a UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) unit provides for the most basic needs of women's health and family planning. Meanwhile, during our visit, the UN was short of basic equipment like hygiene packages. Due to electricity cuts in the camp UN staff were not able to register refugee rations for a whole day. Some mobile schools, run with the help of UNESCO, have reopened to serve more than 2000 children. This is not enough to meet the basic needs, considering the fact that approx. 2/3 of the refugees in the Camp are below the age of 18. Those children suffer severely from the inhumane conditions in the Camp: Water is scarce, Bathrooms do not work, the food provided is of very low quality according to refugees in the Camp and many families stay largely unprotected to the heat and grave desert conditions (recently there were sand storms).

While talking to refugees, the desperation, anger and helplessness are omnipresent. The anger mounted into riots on October 2nd, when several containers were destroyed and burned, among them the local branch of the German agency for technical relief (THW). Refugees said that two children had died due to the conditions during a sand storm, but local aid workers cannot confirm such rumours.

Estimates regarding the current refugee population in the Camp vary between 20.000 and 35.000 (see UNHCR statistics [here](#)). According to help workers in the Camp up to 5000 people went back to Syria due to the terrible conditions in Al-Zaatari. Some have tried to leave the camp: "We arrived in the camp at first, but left it for Irbid [close-by Jordanian city, biggest population after Amman] due to the terrible conditions in. But in Irbid we found no work, living expenses are too high. Now we come back to the Camp, but we do not want to stay; the heat, the

dust, water is boiling... We rather go and die in Dera'a [city in Syria across the border, heavily shelled by the Syrian army ever since the protest originated there] than stay in Al-Zaartari" says the mother of a family arriving at the gates.

Jordan's leadership is nervous regarding the rising [frustration](#) among its own population due to the lack of internal reforms, participation and economic prospects, and for this reason increasingly wary regarding the influx of additional refugees. Jordan has taken in large numbers of refugees from Iraq in the past, but the country faces a budget deficit and a severe water crisis, which goes beyond the traditional lack of resources. According to some reports more than 100.000 Syrian refugees have entered the country before the establishment of the camp and struggle with the high prices and growing hostility among some Jordanians. However, exact numbers are unclear.

Jordanian authorities currently oversee all activities related to the Camp, which is administered by UNHCR (see current fact sheet [here](#)). Political delegations visit the Camp regularly, but so far improvement occurs slowly. "Well, every day somebody comes come to obstruct our work" says a help worker commenting on lines of armoured cars entering the camp. During a recent visit by Crown Prince Hassan of Jordan the delivery of water canisters was stopped for 5 hours due to security arrangements considering the frustration in the camp.

On October 5<sup>th</sup> a [protest rally](#) which attracted at least 15.000 people in the centre of Amman, co-organized by the Muslim Brotherhood, has shown the potential for protest against the government – and the king. Demonstrators shouted "the people want to reform the regime" (a variation of the Egyptian slogan "the people want the fall of the regime"), but red lines for protests increasingly seems to disappear. The internal pressure will most probably continue to harden Jordan's reaction to the refugee crisis, which should be of concern to the international community; both to prevent the breach of humanitarian law by local authorities as well as insure urgently needed assistance for the well-being of the refugees. Western governments have to come to terms with finding their own, effective answer to the refugee crisis.



[Al-Zaatari](#): Dusty road in the camp; on the right a container destroyed in riots.



**Al-Zaatari: Tents in the desert.**



**Al-Zaatari: Refugee Tent.**



**Al-Zaatari: Water tanks. Water is scarce in the Camp.**



**Al-Zaatari: Woman baking for her family. Food is of lowest quality according to people.**



**Al-Zaatari: Recently opened UNICEF school**



**Al-Zaatari: Refugees returning to the Camp.**