

Displaced Christians in Lebanon experience a life in waiting

Doreen Abi Raad Catholic News Service | Sep. 16, 2013
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The misery experienced by Mariam, her husband, Ephrem, and their three young children is just one example of hundreds of thousands of Christians in the Middle East, displaced by wars in which they are not participating.

The family's place of transition is a single room in a run-down building in Beirut. It is a building full of people like them who have fled the war in Syria, all attempting to eke out an existence.

A glimmer of hope momentarily appears in the eyes of Mariam's neighbors congregating on the stairwells when a stranger accompanies Ephrem to the family's room on the third floor. That's likely a reflection of their dream that someday, someone can arrange to rescue them from their misery.

The refugees requested that only their first names be used to protect their identities.

At first, just Ephrem, Mariam and their children lived in the room. But as the situation in Syria worsened, more of Ephrem's family fled to neighboring Lebanon. Now, seven adults and five children are crammed into the small space.

Holding year-old Youssef, Mariam greets a visitor as she and her husband roll up foam mattresses still on the floor.

Youssef's siblings, Takla, 4, and Nada, 2, are sound asleep on the two single beds pushed together in the sparsely furnished room. Suitcases are piled atop the stand-alone closet beside a small couch. There are no toys.

Before coming to Lebanon, the couple and their children had lived in Darya, a suburb of the Syrian capital of Damascus. Ephrem's job as a teacher at an electronics institute had been enough to support the family and for Mariam to stay at home with the children.

Not long after the initial uprising against the regime of President Bashar Assad, their neighborhood had seen intense fighting, caught between posts for the Syrian army and the rebel group, the Free Syrian Army.

"Before, we were living in a good way with Muslims. But when the Al-Nusra Front came in -- we could recognize them by their long beards and long shirts -- many of the Muslims turned fanatic," Ephrem explained, referring to the al-Qaida-linked jihadist group.

When leaving the house became too risky, Ephrem quit his job. Before long, the couple saw no other alternative but to flee Syria.

It was a predicament all too familiar for Mariam, who was about to become a refugee for the second time. "I never imagined that I would experience Iraq all over again. I felt the same fear," she said.

In 2007, Mariam, her parents and siblings fled to Damascus from their native Baghdad to escape the same kinds

of danger. Amid the family's misery as refugees, Mariam, then 22, soon met and fell in love with Ephram, a Syrian Christian, and they married.

By 2010, the rest of Mariam's family had been resettled in Canada and Holland by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. Even though by that time she had her own family and was happy that her parents and siblings could begin a new life, "I felt that I was left alone," Mariam recounted.

The exodus of Christians from Iraq has reduced their numbers from 1 million to less than 400,000, according to the office of the Chaldean Catholic patriarchate.

Amid Syria's deteriorating situation, the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq has received more than 100,000 refugees, some 46,000 who arrived during a two-week period in September, Caritas Iraq reported.

According to the UNHCR, the overall number of Syrian refugees passed the 2 million mark in early September.

Tiny Lebanon, with its population of about 3.5 million people, has received more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees, the most of any country in the region. Before the Syrian crisis began there were already more than 50,000 Iraqi refugees living in Lebanon.

When Mariam and Ephrem went to register their family with the UNHCR after arriving in Lebanon in December, they learned they did not qualify because the organization already had a file on Mariam as an Iraqi refugee. Consequently, the family is eligible for a single monthly voucher of approximately \$25, instead of the nearly \$125 they could have received as a registered family. They said they hope to be resettled under Mariam's case.

Ephrem's mother and single brother were the latest family members to arrive in Lebanon in July. A month earlier, Ephrem's 30-year old niece was killed in a bombing in Damascus. "She went out only to buy bread," Ephrem's 78-year-old mother said. "Her body was unrecognizable. They only knew her by her shoes."

"A lot of Christian people are being killed in this war," Ephrem added. "Why is the world closing their eyes to this?"

Meanwhile, no one in Ephrem's extended family has found work in Lebanon, and the meager funds they came with are running dry.

"My children are not getting enough nutrition, not even enough milk. We're not able to give them what they need," Mariam said. "With all these pressures, it's hard for us to show love to one another."

Maintaining hygiene is a major problem. Aside from the 12 people in their room, a single bathroom on the floor also is shared by six of their neighbors.

In their building, water only flows for a maximum of five hours a day, a casualty of Lebanon's 15-year civil war that ended in 1990. Residents who can afford it typically rely on private water companies for deliveries.

The family is grateful to the Syriac Catholic patriarchate for paying the refugees' rent. Syriac Patriarch Ignace Joseph III Younan previously told CNS that refugees from Syria regularly come looking for help and that it is becoming increasingly difficult to find housing for them.

Meanwhile, refugees continue to pour into Lebanon at a rate of about 10,000 to 12,000 a week, said Fr. Simon Faddoul, president of Caritas Lebanon. So far, the organization has been able to help about 125,000 refugees since the Syria's civil war erupted in March 2011.

"But the needs keep growing, day by day," Faddoul told Catholic News Service.

"Now we have 1.5 million Syrian refugees," he said. "What will we do if they become 2 million? How will we provide for them?"

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