

Letter from Aleppo No 42 (November 2nd 2021)

SAD FACES

The Aleppins will never forget the years 2012 to 2016 when the war raged in Aleppo.

They vividly remember the bombs and gas canisters filled with explosives and nails thrown by rebel armed groups in East Aleppo on their neighborhoods, killing many civilians on daily basis.

They remember the hours of anxiety and fear waiting for their loved ones to return home.

They remember the suffering they endured, the cold in winters because of the lack of heating oil and the evenings spent, for years, in the darkness because of the lack of electricity (due to the power stations being in the hands of terrorists).

They can't forget the years when they were without running water (the terrorists having cut off an entire city's water supply), and the hours they spent waiting their turn in front of hastily dug wells anywhere in the city, to fill their water containers.

They will always remember the repeated blockades of the city when no one could get in or out, isolating Aleppo and its people and causing shortages of all essentials.

Today, November 2nd, they will go to the cemeteries to pray at the graves of their parents, relatives and friends killed during the years of war.

They still live in the nostalgia to the happy days when all their family members lived in Aleppo, before they became dispersed in all the countries of the world.

Despite all this suffering in recent years, the Aleppins now repeat "we lived better during the war years than now", "we regret the time of the bombs which was more bearable than the poverty we suffer now".

Indeed, it is the poverty bomb that has now exploded in Syria leaving 80% of the population living below the poverty threshold and 60% living in food insecurity. Now that the fighting has almost ceased for about two years and the military situation is in status quo, the economic situation is dire.

The prices of essential commodities have increased dramatically, causing the cost of rents and the cost of living to rise. The shortage persisted with rationing of gasoline, bread, sugar, rice ... The wages, on the other hand, were not adjusted proportionally causing increased poverty. The majority of families can no longer make ends meet and rely on food, medical and cash assistance from NGOs to survive.

This situation is the result of several causes including the destruction of the country's infrastructure and the ravages of war, the financial crisis in Lebanon where many Syrians lost their capital to invest and their savings for their retirement, but also the unfair sanctions imposed by European countries and the United States, which block financial transactions, prevent importation and prohibit investment in Syria. In addition, the Covid19 pandemic has worsened the situation through the deaths it has caused and the preventive measures that slowed down an already moribund economic activity.

Many of our compatriots tell us that they regret their decision to stay in the country when emigration was easy, and many dream of settling elsewhere. In August of this year alone, seventeen thousand young Aleppo people left the country to settle and work elsewhere, especially in Egypt. We are suffering of the departure of what has remained of the skilled labor and artisans. Small businesses that take the risk of opening up can no longer find skilled workers to run their machines; and it is the other countries that benefit from our doctors, engineers, artisans, laborers and other professionals who were trained here in Syria, and who participate in the economic growth or in filling the staff shortages of certain professions in other countries.

This summer, we saw many people coming back to Aleppo who had fled the war and migrated elsewhere. They came back to visit their relatives again, to tidy up their home which they had left urgently, and to get rid of clothes and other items that were no longer needed, to renew their passports and to get in order with administrative formalities that have remained unresolved since their departure. When asked about their impression of Aleppo, many of these people used the same expression: “we saw SAD FACES”. These Aleppins who returned to Aleppo after several years of absence, have spoken out loud about what we have been feeling for some time. People are sad, as well as their faces and souls, and their hearts are even sadder. How do you expect it to be otherwise when we have lived, for 10 years, between the military bombs and the bomb of poverty?

It is in this context that we, the Blue Marists, continue to work to sow a little joy in the hearts of children, and a little hope in the minds of adults, to help people find jobs and families to make ends meet, to educate children and also adults.

Our “Colibri” project, which takes care of displaced families from Shahba camp, continues its educational and medical activities and provides material support to families in terms of food and hygiene. However, this project is threatened; the Turkish army which occupies the Syrian region of Afrin is bombarding the surroundings of the camp and has distributed flyers by plane to the population of the region to warn them of the imminence of a large-scale military operation "to liberate the region from terrorists” (sic).

The “Sharing Bread” project is very popular with the people of Aleppo; twelve ladies cook every day in our premises to prepare a daily hot meal (with a piece of fruit and bread) that our 25 volunteers distribute (with a smile and a listening ear) at noon to more than 200 elderly people living alone without a family and without resources.

We started a second phase of our “Professional Training” program with 20 young adults who we placed as apprentices with a mentor to learn a trade and become a plumber, carpenter, electrician, mechanic, painter, tailor etc.

The "Micro-projects" program continues training adults to initiate projects and to fund projects with a chance of success. Unfortunately, the economic crisis makes the chances of success much more difficult.

“Learn to Grow” and “I want to learn”, our two educational projects for children aged 3 to 6 from poor families or displaced families respectively, were unable to accept all applications and regretfully had to refuse children who nevertheless need us. Our space is used to its maximum capacity and cannot accommodate more than 210 children and the 31 educators accompanying them.

Seeds, the psychological support project, is growing enormously. Thirty volunteers under the direction of our chief psychologist take care of 450 children from 3 to 16 years old through Lotus program for the little ones and Bamboo program for older children without forgetting to mention support for adults.

Heartmade continues to employ 13 women to recycle the rest of the fabrics and make them unique pieces for the ladies; combating waste, protecting the environment and giving women jobs, these are the principles of the project.

The candidates are scrambling to register for the "Women's Development" project. Two groups of 20 women are organized for three-month sessions. Workshops on general education, health recommendations, personal training and archaeological

visits enrich the project which also offers a space of conviviality and freedom to the participants.

Our training center for adults, our "MIT" organizes workshops of 12, 20 and 56 hours of training on various useful topics. We can only accept 20 participants per workshop who are led by the best experts in Aleppo.

The "Hope" project teaches English to mothers.

We continue to distribute milk to children under 11 "Drop of Milk", to contribute to the costs of medical care for needy people (more than 150 medical procedures per month), to pay the rent of 200 displaced families who cannot afford to do so and to give, each month, money in cash to 450 families of Aleppo sponsored by Polish families under the auspices of a program organized by a Polish NGO.

The number of Blue Marists is increasing; we are now 170 volunteers and employees. The new volunteers must participate in Marist formation sessions before being admitted for good. In addition, a regular training program is mandatory for all members.

We are confident that the situation will not improve until the sanctions are lifted; that is why we are calling for their end and we ask you, dear friends, to put pressure on your elected representatives and the authorities of your countries to end the sanctions.

We realize that everything we do is just a drop in the ocean of need; but this drop is essential for the well-being of thousands of families.

We try to make the FACES of our compatriots a little LESS SAD, but it is not easy.

We count on your solidarity and your prayers.

Aleppo November 2nd, 2021.

Dr. Nabil Antaki
For the Blue Marists