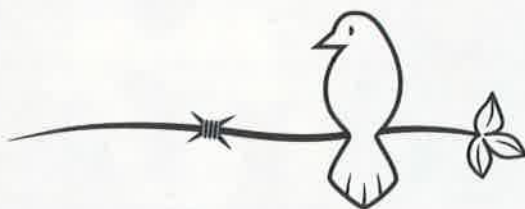


Lesbos 2015

A Project of
Christian Peacemaker Teams



christian peacemaker teams

The Work of Christian Peacemaker Teams

Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) works around the world supporting communities in the nonviolent struggle against violence and oppression as they stand for human rights and witness to a world without war. CPT is inspired by the witness of Jesus and of many individuals and groups who are working nonviolently to reclaim their dignity and human rights.

In the spring of 2014 European CPTers initiated a project on the Greek island of Lesbos, working alongside local partners to accompany and protect refugees. Many of the young men arriving on European shores have chosen peace and are fleeing military service; many of the women and children are in grave danger, even in the midst of their flight to a “safe” Europe.

This report, written by the three project coordinators, offers a summary of the work performed by our team this summer. There were many long days and nights, fraught with emotional situations and difficult decisions. We are very proud of the work accomplished by all of our team members, under very challenging circumstances in a crisis that was continually in flux.

J. Jakob Fehr, Ramyar Hassani and Annika Spalde, project coordinators



How the Lesbos Project Began ...

CPT team members in Europe are scattered throughout the continent. We meet once a year at our Convergence to strategize and coordinate the work we are doing in our home countries. In 2014 we were invited by Greek partners to accompany their work with refugees on Lesbos. We were able to be present for three months.

At the London Convergence in May 2015, a group of 20 committed CPTers and interested guests deliberated whether to return to Lesbos in the summer. We also organised a public witness in the centre of London calling on the British government to change its restrictive refugee policy.

Because our local partners requested that we return, we again made plans for a three-month stint on Lesbos in this summer, trusting that the needed funds would materialise. However, as we prepared for our return, we had no idea how dramatic the situation would soon become!

Why Refugees Come to Lesbos

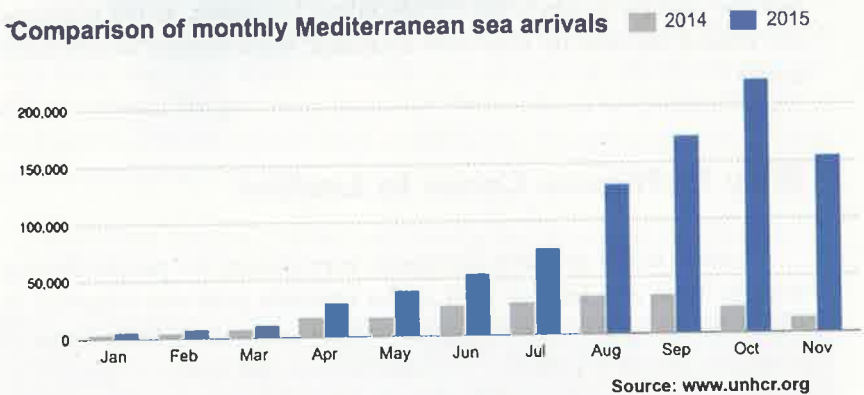
Lesbos is the primary European way-station for people fleeing the wars in Syria and Iraq, as well as the unstable post-war situation in Afghanistan — 93% of the refugees we met came from these three countries. The distance from the Turkish shore to the safety of Europe is 6 to 10 kilometres; by day you can see the island clearly from the other side. From this vantage point, it becomes clear that the official border between the European Union and its neighbours is permeable. The real lived experiences of peoples in this region is not one of separation and exclusion, but of interaction.

The people who take this route are desperate. Most of them know nothing about Europe. They know nothing about the problems they will face here or how they will be treated. But they do know this: when they arrive on European soil they don't need to be afraid that their child will be shot at with military weapons whilst playing in the streets.

They know nothing about our politics, except that in Europe they will leave behind war and chaos and indescribable suffering.

It is a painful decision to become a refugee. Everyone has relatives they leave behind. Everyone has friends whom they may never see again. They all have familiar places that they love: homes and public places and shops and a doctor's office. All of it will be gone, when they board a flimsy plastic dinghy heading across the Lesbos strait, and the poor among them will be wearing a life-jacket stuffed with grass.

This summer saw an unprecedented, astonishing increase in the number of refugees. No-one was prepared for this: not the mayor of Mytilene, not the Greek government, not UNHCR, not CPT. We all had to scramble to find new ways of dealing with the crisis. The following graph compares the numbers for 2014 and 2015.



The Refugee Situation on Lesbos

This year our work on Lesbos was confronted with an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. The high number of arrivals on Lesbos exacerbated a situation already strained by the Greek economic crisis. The resources to provide a response that meets international standards of aid and protection for refugees were entirely lacking. As a result we witnessed distressing conditions in the over-crowded refugee camps, including severe deficiencies in shelter, food security, health services, water and sanitation. In addition there was a general failure to provide



necessary coordination and camp management, and the EU registration process collapsed entirely under the pressure of the extraordinary number of refugees.

Although CPT is not a humanitarian aid actor, through our regular presence in the camps we were able to help by listening to the concerns of the refugees and monitoring their most immediate needs, by raising public awareness and by working together with NGOs and the island's volunteer communities to provide some of the necessary assistance.

We also took time to sit down and hear the stories of the refugees; not just the traumatizing experiences that made them flee their home countries and resort to the dangerous crossing of the Mediterranean, but also the mutual exchange of stories of ordinary daily lives, cultures, hopes and dreams.

In July chaos spread with the rising numbers because the authorities were incapable of organising basic human needs for the refugees. Large numbers of news media descended on the island, and because of the public outcry, shortly afterward a semblance of order and care was provided.

But then in August when we thought that the situation had stabilized, disorder was again the order of the day. Although there were now two camps, Kara Tepe for the Syrians and Moria for all other refugees, need continued to outstrip resources (see page 8-9 below). The camp at Kara Tepe had no officials, no guards and only one small water source for 600 to 1,200 people. At the Moria camp there were only guards within the official "reception centre"; the overflow area - which often held over a thousand people - was entirely uncared for by the authorities. Much of the food, water, health care and shelter was provided by dozens of hard-working volunteers from a variety of organisations (Village of All Together, Save the Children, Islamic Relief, Welcome to Europe, Social Kitchen, ShelterBox, actionaid, IsraAid and many others!).

And in spite of repeated efforts, it proved impossible to coordinate the work of all these organisations in an effective manner. For example, there are two large professional NGOs working in the field of health care, whose leadership saw each other as rivals and proved incapable of coordinating their responsibilities — a factor that made it difficult for us to refer injured persons to medical personnel quickly.

What was CPT Doing? Our Team's Activities

At the port in Mytilene

One of our major tasks was to be present at the port, where refugees buy ferry tickets to Athens. We handed out leaflets that we had developed (in Farsi, Arabic, English and French) providing information on safe and unsafe places in Athens. As often as possible, we would arrive one or two hours before the ferry set sail.

When the team saw that the registration procedure in the port area – until it was terminated on the 6th of September – didn't function well, a lot of time was spent close to the registration queue. Our presence had the effect on the police and coastguard of reducing the threat of violence. Several times we actively intervened and told the officers to stop hitting people with their trunche-



ons.

Since very few other NGOs were present at the port – only Médecins Sans Frontières and Médecins du Monde showed an occasional presence – we were often surrounded by refugees with different concerns and questions. We answered people's questions, and we helped especially vulnerable people to come to the alternative reception centre Pikpa when possible. We argued with ferry line representatives (on one occasion convincing them to allow two people onto the ferry without tickets), with the coastguard and police. We helped people by contacting our best Arabic translator, who could enter the police cabin and sort out problems with people's registrations. We also occasionally distributed water to people waiting in the registration line.

Pikpa Welcome Center

Since the Village of All Together (the Village) is CPT's main partner on Lesbos, it is a high priority for us to assist it when we are asked for help. The Village is a network of Greek and migrants living on Lesbos who care for refugees. They do an amazing amount of work!



The Village says: "Our dream is to create proper reception and hospitality centres for every refugee as well any Greek national who has been a victim of the economic crisis, racism and xenophobic propaganda."

. Their most famous activity is running Pikpa. Pikpa is a self-organised, autonomous reception centre for refugees in a well-shaded, almost idyllic former youth camp near the airport. There is no fence or barbed wire to confine people and the organising is done locally, voluntarily and without state funding. Pikpa is tolerated by the island authorities.

We were present at Pikpa especially during food distributions, we assisted in the sorting of clothes, we drafted and translated a contract between the Village and the residents of Pikpa, we helped them in de-

signing and formulating explanatory signs in Arabic and Farsi to be posted at Pikpa. Several times CPT team members mediated in conflicts between residents and between members of the Village. And occasionally we were 'merely' present to engage in conversation with the refugees, showing them the welcoming and humane face of Europe.

Our other activities serving the Village outside of Pikpa included accompanying refugees to the hospital; accompanying families of the deceased to the morgue; and assisting and being present at funerals of refugees. As well, we found financial donors to help realise the plan to open a café for refugees in the city centre (planned for December 2015).



Kara Tepe - The New Temporary Reception Centre

Since June 2015 the paved, shadeless site of a driver education park called Kara Tepe has been used for temporary accommodation for refugees. In July it was decided that only Syrians should be sent here, to avoid conflicts between Syrians and other nationalities, who are angry because Syrians are prioritized over them. (The reason for this is that the European Union has established quotas for accepting certain small numbers of Syrians, but not other nationalities.) The team visited Kara Tepe regularly, monitoring the situation.

At first there was no organization at all, no police or other services and hardly any NGOs were present. The CPT team provided information and solidarity. On several occasions we accompanied people staying at Kara Tepe to the hospital. For one week at the end of August team members cooperated with the organization ShelterBox, setting up tents in Kara Tepe and organising who would stay in them. In addition to talking to people about the tents, very often refugees approached us with other kinds of questions and requests. In August we aided the distribution of food and medicine through relief organisations like Social Kitchen and Solidarity Clinic.

On one occasion we intervened and de-escalated a very tense situation when refugees, who were frustrated by lack of food, water and shelter, as well as a complete failure of communication from the authorities, blocked the major thoroughfare leading into the city — an action that brought a large-scale police presence to Kara Tepe.

Moria - The First Reception Centre

Close to the village of Moria, about 15 km from Mytilene, there is an EU-financed Reception Centre (opened in September 2013) that has a capacity for ca. 400 persons. It was built like a prison with high fences, barbed wire and sentinel posts. A newly constructed complex on the same site was opened in September 2015, but relatively few refugees have been placed there.



Beginning in August all non-Syrians were registered in this Centre. Because their numbers far exceed the capacity, refugees stayed in small tents or sought shelter under trees, waiting for their turn to be let in for registration. Most often the catering services have been totally inadequate and people were hungry. They often had to wait 3 to 7 days or even longer to be registered. The conditions in Moria were even worse than Kara Tepe.

CPTers monitored the conditions at Moria once or twice a week, especially when the situation was in danger of running out of control, to prevent violence from the police and de-escalate tensions between refugees. We observed that since September many aid organisations and NGOs have been caring for the Syrians at Kara Tepe, but the treatment of all other nationalities at Moria has been abominable. Which brings us to our ...

Political work

We have developed a good relationship with the mayor's office in Mytilene. Mayor Galinos is of course motivated by the political interests his constituency (note that the far-right Golden Dawn party has remained weak on the island), but his interests are partly compatible with ours: making it possible for refugees to move on quickly to Western Europe. His capacity for action is restricted in part by the austerity measures imposed on Greece by the EU.

In August the number of refugees arriving on Lesbos was constantly rising and the available ferry tickets were far too few. In response to this new crisis, on August 14th CPT drafted and sent out a press release together with the Village and two other partners, Agkalia and Welcome to Europe. In this document we issued "A call for emergency ferry transportation and better basic humanitarian assistance."

Beginning in August there were regular meetings of the large professional NGOs to coordinate their work. We attended these meetings and offered occasional questions and critique. Most of the NGOs are very bureaucratic, top-heavy and slow to move (and are not present on weekends or evenings). They also do not attempt to stay in close dialogue with refugees and local activists the way we do. So we have a different perspective on the refugee situation: our focus is on relationship-building, solidarity and accompaniment, whereas the larger NGOs focus on relief aid, organisation and coordinating their work with the police and coast guard.

Media

In 2014 we had to explain to everyone where Lesbos is; this year it wasn't necessary. After the dramatic increase in refugee numbers Lesbos briefly became a major news story this summer. Many media came to the island and interviewed us and other NGOs: Spiegel TV and ZFD (Germany), Italian and Swiss TV programmes, TeleSur (Latin America), Kansanuutiset (Finland), several radio stations and a newspaper in Sweden, Mennonite Weekly Review (USA) among others.

An important aspect of our work is publicity: drawing attention to failures and mismanagement in the political sphere. To this end we have written numerous articles in various languages: Village Magazine (Ireland), Church of Sweden paper, Swedish television website, German Mennonite articles, etc.

It is important to emphasize that one of the major causes of the refugee crisis is the political, military and financial policies of European and North American governments and economies. In the wake of the crisis, many experts are beginning to speak of a “proxy war” in Syria, where the major powers — USA, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Iran — are willing to provoke war in order to gain dominance in the geo-political sphere. The same is true of Iraq and Afghanistan, which are the other chaotic states that are bringing forth large numbers of refugees to Lesbos. This means that we must address our protests and political statements to European and American politicians and the general public.



Other Activities

We work together with the Ex-archeia church community in Athens, which supports Faros, an organisation providing assistance and shelter for some of the most endangered refugees: unaccompanied minors.



Stories from Our Team

“ My colleague Anja and I were in the port one September morning. The big ferry was preparing to leave, with many refugees on board. Two girls, around ten and five years old, were standing close to the gangplank. The older one seemed very nervous. We approached them and asked if they had a problem. The girls were waiting for their father and older brother who had gone to perform some last errand before leaving. The children were very anxious that they would miss the ferry. We stayed with them and comforted them. Soon the father and brother arrived. The father thanked us for our concern and the family then started to enter the boat. But the five-year-old turned back. She came up to Anja and me to take our hands and give us cheek kisses. Then she calmly returned to her family. - Annika ”

“ Among the refugees at the Moria camp I was very moved to meet a group of young Palestinians. They had escaped from the Yarmouk refugee camp, home to the largest Palestinian refugee community in Syria, more than 100,000 people. Tens of thousands of Palestinians have fled Yarmouk since the civil war began in Syria. These young men are reliving what their grandparents and parents had already experienced at the time they left Palestine. Now they are the third generation of refugees in their family, enduring six decades of exile and suffering. What particularly touched me was that these young men were wearing keffiyehs and singing Palestinian songs, bearing witness to their lost country, to which I fear they will never be able to return. - Lorena ”

“ I remember the afternoon when Annika and I came to the overcrowded port. Women and families was sitting in queues on the ground, waiting to be registered. Thousands of refugees waited. The registration booth was closed, but suddenly a policemen appeared and took out his papers. He shouted to me: "You want to help?" "Yes", I answered. "Tell the people that Syrians must go to Kara Tepe and all the others to Moria for registration." Finally we had concrete information. We gave the instructions to as many groups as possible. But at the same time we asked ourselves: Where are all the other NGOs? Where is UNHCR, Red Cross, Save the Children? CPT was the only organisation present on that Sunday afternoon, among thousands of refugees. - Inger ”

“ In early September thousands were waiting at the port for their registration or for a ferry ticket. They waited for days, without enough water or food or shade. The port police was staffed with only three men, sometimes only with one. The queue got longer and people became impatient. Some individuals tried to organise a protest. The protest was countered not by more personnel at the registration, but by riot police, not with words, but with truncheons. Often the patiently waiting refugees didn't know what was happening to them. I was talking with some people at the end of the queue when suddenly the people in front of us scattered. We were confronted by a camouflaged policeman with helmet, shield and raised truncheon. I was relieved when he let down his weapon. Was it because of my CPT t-shirt? It's possible, but I wonder what would have happened if he had seen one of my other teammates? I have white skin, blonde hair and blue eyes. They don't. - Anja ”

Our CPT Team

Members of the Standing Committee

J. Jakob Fehr (Germany), Ramyar Hassani (Norway), Jennifer Otto (Germany), Annika Spalde (Sweden), Ruth Wilde (Great Britain)

Photo; Members of the team in September



Our Field Team

J. Jakob Fehr (Germany), Ramyar Hassani (Norway), Christopher Hatton (Germany), Maureen Jack (Scotland), Johanna Kaprio (Finland), Marianne Kronberg (Sweden), Ronbir Mohammad (Sweden), Lorena Pianezza (Italy), Anja Schneider (Germany), Annika Spalde (Sweden), Inger Styrbjörn (Sweden), Tullio Togni (Italy)

Financial Report

Our team not only did a lot of great work, powered by compassion and enthusiasm. It was also able to complete the project on a shoestring budget of about 6,000 Euros! At times we had only three persons on team, but usually four or five were present. Everyone was responsible for funding their travel costs to Mytilene. All other costs are covered in the budget below.

Because of financial limitations, in the spring of 2015 we decided to end the project in September. Had we known earlier that more funding would arrive in late summer because of the extraordinary publicity, we could have extended the project into the autumn, although we would have had to scramble to find more team members. The funds that remained unused, along with the donations that are still coming in, will be used to expand the project next year. Our project partners have recommended that we should come earlier in the year and have access to a car or van, in order to perform our tasks more efficiently. Up til now we have used taxis, public transport and occasional lifts from our friends in the Village.

Project set-up and planning	930.00
Local transport costs	1,059.21
Food and external lodging	1,960.47
Communications	304.00
Apartment rental	900.00
Organisational costs	899.10*
TOTAL	6,052.78

* The organisational costs include Ramyar's costs when he travelled to the Czech Republic in July to do promotion work for the project.

Thanks

The three coordinators wish to thank all members of the team who participated in our project this summer. You were amazing! We are also thankful for the background support provided by CPTers throughout Europe, as well as our North American partners.

We owe a great debt to the Village of All Together (Το Χωριό του Όλοι Μαζί) for accompanying us in our work. We are thankful for your advice and recommendations, for trusting us to assist you in your tasks, for treating us as equal partners in your important and remarkable work for justice and dignity for all. We also want to express special thanks to our other local partners and their organisations: the NGO Agkalia (Αγκαλιά) in the town of Kalloni (¡Papa Stratis presente!), Welcome to Europe and the Exarcheia church community in Athens.

Finally we thank as well those who supported our work financially, first of all the German Mennonite Peace Committee (DMFK) which provided the largest share of financing, but also to all the many individuals, groups and churches who assisted us monetarily and in prayer.

Plans for the Future

As already mentioned, in the last few months donations have been coming in. And since nearly all team members have expressed an eagerness to return next year, the Standing Committee of CPT Europe have begun planning for 2016. The yearly Convergence which will meet in Hamburg from 24-28 February 2016 (you are welcome to join us!) will decide on the issue of returning, in conjunction with our North American colleagues.

We will be looking for further volunteers to join us as delegates (see the website www.cpt.org). Priority will be given to persons with language skills (especially Arabic and Farsi) and medical skills. If someone could donate a van for several months, that would also be a very welcome contribution. And we need people with communication skills who live in Europe and can serve as our “home team” to maintain our Facebook page and other media.

Further Information

You can contact us here:

info@dmfk.de and cpt-europe@googlegroups.com.

You can find further information about our project by joining us on Facebook:

www.facebook.com/CPTEurope, or by reading our internet blogs.

English-language blog: www.cptmediterranean.wordpress.com

German-language blog: www.cptlesbosprojekt.wordpress.com

As well, Ramyar has written various excellent articles on Beacon. Please support his work: www.beaconreader.com/ramyar-hassani

Twitter: #CPTEurope

Donations can be made by cheque or bank transfer to:

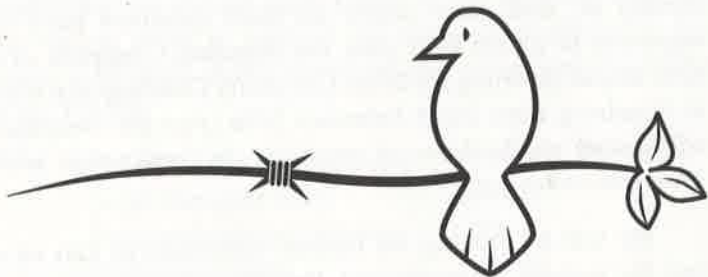
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Key word: CPT Europe

or by financing the costs of one of our team members.



christian peacemaker teams