

## ***Report on the Actions of the Baptist Union in the Refugee Crisis in Croatia***

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

We want to inform you about our endeavors as the Croatian Baptist Union since we have been flooded by this wave of refugees from Syria and other countries from the Middle East.

### ***The situation so far***



When the wave started a week ago (mid September 2015), no one could have guessed what we would be facing. The amount of people coming, directions in which they are going, the time of their arrival to Croatia, all these questions are without answer and the situations are unforeseeable, which makes the challenge of helping those people even greater. However, in just a few days, the organization of the

reception, registration and transportation of refugees to their next stop, has seen drastic improvement. The time passed between the first shock of people who appeared in Tovarnik (Croatian village on the border with Serbia) at the train station, to the redirecting of those people to the refugee camp in Opatovac (which is located on the road Vukovar – Ilok, 12 km from Tovarnik and 17 km from Vukovar) was 48 hours. Since then, there has been a lot more organization and order in working with the refugees.

As far as our engagement in this situation is concerned, we can say that our Lord is great and is full of grace. Our engagement started about 24 hours after the crisis began. In Zagreb, our General Secretary Željko Mraz had a meeting with the mayor of Zagreb, Milan Bandić, and other institutions, religious communities and NGO's to direct a joint appeal to the citizens of our country to help; they also went to inspect the space in Zagreb that was supposed to receive the people who were trying to get to the Slovenian border on their own, in a very unorganized fashion. Brothers and sisters in Baptist churches in Zagreb organized themselves in collecting and distribution of donations, i.e. first necessities and then organized a headquarters for collection and distribution of donations. The coordinator is pastor Mihal Kreko (Baptist Church Zagreb West) along with the NGO Fokus.

They were provided with a space of 80m<sup>2</sup> in their neighbourhood (free of charge), from one Syrian gentleman, who has been living and working in Zagreb for many years, where they could collect, pack and distribute help. The next step was reaching an agreement with the Agrokor group (biggest supplier company in region), about the purchase of goods with 7% discount and a delay in payment of 20 days. That is how we managed to buy and deliver food and supplies for 1000 people in Tovarnik right away.

In Zagreb, supplies are being collected in several places in our churches, as well as in STEP (IFES Croatia) through which a big donation of fruit and vegetables has been made. With the first shipment from Zagreb came also our brother Frank Bosch with his clown equipment, and he entertained

children with songs and games. The plan now is to have shipments from Zagreb go to Opatovac two times a week, in cooperation with the team that is always in the field.

Our volunteers were sent to the eastern border, Tovarnik, where the situation was chaotic the first two days, to help and distribute food and supplies. Our engagement was soon noticed by the Red Cross leaders, but also by the Assistant of the Minister of internal affairs, and we were invited to follow them to the refugee camp in Opatovac. God's provision put us inside



of the refugee camp Opatovac, and we were able to work when no other organization could. We were given assignments and a space inside of the camp that was our responsibility. That way our volunteers were there since the first bus with refugees came to the camp.

Two days ago Toma Magda had the opportunity to go to the camp, to see our volunteers and talk to the people who are working there, Red Cross director, Assistant of the Minister of internal affairs, and to the Minister himself, who is there most of the time. What he heard from people he talked to, is a unanimous observation that our volunteers were present at the right time, when volunteers were scarce, and they are very committed to what they are doing – and they are doing a great job. Everyone is very grateful for the help of our volunteers.

The procedure of the reception of refugees is well organized and looks like this: buses bring people from the border to the entrance of the camp. The camp is enclosed and no one without accreditation can get into the camp. Photos are forbidden inside the camp, which is why all reporters are at the entrance. Also, various organizations are at the entrance as well, handing out food and water while people wait to get in. Our volunteers have strategically placed our partners from the NGO Remar on the one side, and our partners from Hungarian Baptist Aid and others on the other side of the entrance, so that they can reach as many people as possible, when refugees come flooding in front of the entrance. Outside the entrance is also a fenced space, where our volunteers are giving out water, bananas and energy and chocolate bars. After they enter the camp, they need to be registered and if necessary, provided with medical assistance and initial medical examination. While people wait to be registered inside the camp, our volunteers, alongside the Red Cross, are giving out food. When registration is finished, people go to tents where they can rest and receive a hot meal while they wait for the bus to take them to the Hungarian border.

As time passes, the organization gets better and a routine is starting to form – three days ago we introduced a three-shift system, where our volunteers work in shifts of 8 hours, so that we can be present in the field 24/7. At the beginning, our volunteers were working for 17-18 hours. Thursday night was much more challenging because of the rain and the 7000 people that arrived to Opatovac during the night. We need to say something important here: when the weather was good, there were more volunteers working from other organization; as the weather got worse, so the number of volunteers reduced. This past Thursday night, our 5 volunteers did all the work. Try to imagine: 7000

people coming, middle of the night, rain, and a handful of volunteers who were with those people all night, standing in the rain.



All of our volunteers are wearing t-shirts with “Croatian Baptist Union – Croatian Baptist Aid” written on them. But not all of them are Baptist. Some are from the Pentecostal church, some are citizens from Osijek, and there is also a volunteer from Fokus that came all the way from Split to be with us. They are accredited and are able to work inside the camp, whether it’s giving out food, sorting clothes, or helping in the kitchen alongside Caritas, making meals for people.

We have also established a system of regular purchase and delivery of food that is given out at the entrance, while people wait to be registered – and it is working very well. Our pastor David Dobutović (pastor of the Baptist church in Eastern Slavonia), who has just returned from directing our summer camp on the coast for five months, is doing great work in purchasing supplies – and is doing it much more often than it is done during our summer camps. Our brother Elvis Džafić from the Baptist church in Osijek, who is coordinating the volunteers, is reporting on the situation and the needs regularly, so that we can focus on whatever is necessary at the moment, and not bring things that are not crucial. Our church building in near by town of Vinkovci is being used as a storage house, so that we can be prompt in reacting to the needs in the camp. The storage is located within 1 hour of the refugee camp. Thursday night we had two interventions like this, so nothing was missing from the camp. It is interesting that many organizations and individuals from abroad, who are sending help, often want us to receive and distribute it, and not the Red Cross. Whatever we receive, we try to give out as soon as possible, and whatever can be used in the kitchen is sent there – everything that remains is stored in Vinkovci until it is needed.

Just a couple of days ago we received a phone call from a Portuguese lawyer saying that she had sent two trucks that are now waiting in Vinkovci. Within half hour, the drivers were contacted, directed to the storage house, and were found a place to stay for the night.

Another interesting example from two days ago was the following: one Syrian organization based in London brought a van-full of help to Opatovac and left it to our volunteers. They also said that they have more money and asked what is necessary. They went back to Vinkovci, bought what was needed, spent all the money and brought it to our storage. Muslim Syrians brought help to their countrymen and left it to Baptists to distribute it. What can one say to that? It is a testimony.

One church from Sweden also sent help through us. 80% of their members are Syrians who became believers.

These stories are just small pieces of a mosaic that our Lord is creating these days in eastern Slavonia.

### ***What do we need?***

1. What we need is support through prayer – for these unfortunate people, for the volunteers that are working tirelessly, and also for the police who is handling all of this very efficiently and professionally. You have witnessed what has happened in the past days in Saudi Arabia, during Hajj (Muslim pilgrimage), when more than 700 people were killed during a stampede. It can be very dangerous when a group of a few thousand people heads for the fence or the buses in Opatovac. If it wasn't for our special forces, who is doing a great job, we honestly don't know how this situation would unfold. So pray for all the people who are involved in this crisis, and also that the Lord puts an end to this great wave, to have peace restored where there's war, so that people don't need to leave their homes.
2. If there is those who are willing to dedicate a week to volunteer with us in shifts, let us know, because there will be need. We will organize housing.
3. We are still trying to organize financial help with other Baptist unions in Europe and USA, because we have run out of funds – all financial help is very welcome. If you have the possibility to raise some funds, please do so and send it to our Union account.

Sisters and brothers, we hope that we were able to give you a better picture of what is going on and how the Lord is using us in this trouble, where people are traveling days and weeks to some, for them, "promise land".

Your brothers in Christ,

Toma Magda, President of the Baptist Union of Croatia

Željko Mraz, General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Croatia