



IOCC Expands in Syria

New Program Aids Iraqi Refugees



IOCC Baltimore

Jeanette fled the dangers of Iraq for the safety of Damascus, Syria. With little chance of finding work, she dreams of getting her parents out of Baghdad and emigrating to Canada. "I want what everyone wants," she says, "a job, a home, a safe place to live." IOCC's \$1.98 million program provides emergency supplies to Iraqi refugees like Jeanette, and tuition assistance for young people.

Damascus, Syria — It was a cold yet sunny day after Christmas when a young Iraqi woman walked to church in central Damascus, Syria where workers were unloading boxes of hygiene supplies to crowds of waiting Iraqi refugees. An American reporter asked Jeanette to comment on her situation. She responded defiantly, "Everyone knows how bad the situation is for Iraqi refugees in Syria." Then, she began to tell her story. Twenty-eight-years-old and a college graduate, she worked in Baghdad for a foreign organization that provided computer and English language training for dis-

advantaged children. Her work was fulfilling. She even traveled to Jordan for further training, but like many Iraqis who work with foreigners, she was threatened by insurgents who view such Iraqis as collaborators. When a church near her home was bombed in 2007, her parents decided to send her and her brother to Damascus. Today, jobless and with little chance of finding meaningful work in Syria, she dreams of getting her parents out of Baghdad and migrating to Canada.

On the other side of Damascus, in the predominantly Shi'a neighborhood of Set Zeinab, a man named Kazin tells visitors another

dramatic story of escape from Iraq. Kazin, a tailor who once owned his own shop in the holy Shi'a city of Karbala, was imprisoned and tortured during the Saddam years merely because some of his clients were political dissidents. He was eventually released and came to Syria where he supports his family in their small apartment by sewing women's head coverings. "I want to return to Karbala," says Kazin, "but I know that my shop and all my property were taken." When his 16-year-old daughter Fatima steps into the room and shyly greets the visitors, he proudly holds out one of her science books and says that his greatest hope in life now is for her to become a surgeon.

One of the World's Largest Refugee Emergencies

The U.N. estimates that, since 2003, over 4 million Iraqi refugee and internally displaced persons have fled their homes. Of that 4 million, an estimated 1.5 million are living in Syria. However, since Syria and other Middle Eastern host countries do not allow their Iraqi "guests" to work, staying is not a viable option – but neither is returning to an unstable Iraq.

IOCC is addressing this crisis by significantly expanding its humanitarian work in Syria, begun in 2002 with small projects for schools and orphanages. The current \$1.98 million program assists 4,100 Iraqi refugees and

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From the Executive Director

As I write this message I am flying over the Atlantic Ocean returning from a monitoring visit to Greece. During our brief time there we witnessed a distribution of animal feed, met with farmers receiving assistance, villagers still struggling to rebuild their lives, and officials from the government and church. You'll read more about our Greece efforts in this issue of *News & Needs*.

Staring out over the vast ocean I think about my upcoming 15th anniversary with IOCC on April 1st. I recall the countless people I have met, the miles travelled and the time away from home. I wonder where I will get the energy to get back on a plane in three days to visit our operations in Ethiopia.

Then I read the *News & Needs* stories about the courageous people that IOCC encounters every day, and I am energized. I think about the displaced families returning to their homes in Kosovo with the assistance of the monks of the Visoki Decani monastery and our Belgrade staff.

I am inspired by Marie Chahine, the remarkable school principal in Beirut fighting for a better learning environment for her students, and her partnership with IOCC Lebanon.

I am grateful for our partnership with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and the expansion of our work in Syria. Our \$1.98 million project is providing emergency supplies, tuition assistance, and vocational training to thousands of Iraqis and disadvantaged Syrians. Samer Laham, the Director of Development for the Patriarchate, calls this new program, a "sign of solidarity to the most vulnerable."

And I think of you, our supporters, who allow us to keep that solidarity with thousands of men and women around the world – thank you. I am honored to serve you, our hierarchs, the Board and staff of IOCC. I am humbled by the love of my wife and children, who support all that I do. And, most of all, I am blessed by God to participate in His ministry of love and compassion.

Yours In Christ,

Constantine M. Triantafilou
Executive Director & CEO



What inspires us?

IOCC beneficiaries who overcome hardship. (from left) Marie in Lebanon finds creative ways to improve her public school; Vinka had the courage to return to Kosovo after fleeing the 1999 conflict; Vasili works hard to keep his family's farm going in the aftermath of last summer's wildfires in Greece.

photo credits: (from left)
IOCC Baltimore; N. Prelevic/
IOCC Serbia; Sophia Clark

International Orthodox Christian Charities, Inc. (IOCC) was established in 1992 by the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA) as the official humanitarian aid agency of Orthodox Christians to work in cooperation with Orthodox Churches worldwide.

The mission of IOCC is to respond to the call of our Lord Jesus Christ, to minister to those who are suffering and are in need throughout the world, sharing with them God's gifts of food, shelter, economic self-sufficiency and hope.

Published three times a year by IOCC, News & Needs is edited by Dan Christopoulos and Amal Morcos.



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IOCC Expands in Syria

(continued from front cover)

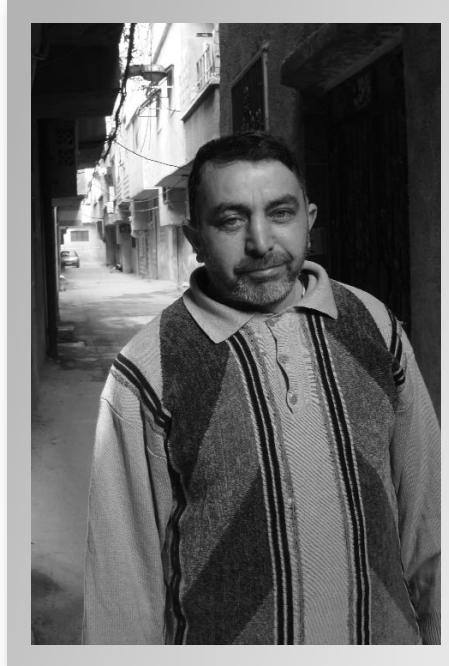
disadvantaged Syrians with school tuition, uniforms, supplies and tutoring. Others are receiving the vocational training of their choice including, hair styling, car repair, cell phone repair, sewing, and computer skills.

The program, funded by the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (BPRM), is also providing Christian, Sunni, and Shi'a Iraqi and disadvantaged Syrian families with emergency hygiene supplies, and 15,000 school kits worth \$228,000 are being delivered to schools through the efforts of Orthodox parishes around the country and IOCC's partnership with Church World Service (CWS). In addition, Lutheran World Relief (LWR) has donated 9,500 baby kits worth \$358,000 to the program.

Easing Syria's Social Welfare Burden

"IOCC's program eases the social welfare burden on Syria's central government created by the absorption of so many refugees," says Samer Laham, Director of Development for the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch which is implementing IOCC's program in Syria. "It is beyond the capacity of Syria and the United Nations to completely assist all the Iraqis in this country," he continued. IOCC's program is being implemented in other parts of Syria that harbor large numbers of Iraqi refugees including the northeastern city of Al Kameeshly near the Iraqi and Turkish borders and the northwestern city of Aleppo.

One of the most effective aspects of IOCC's program in Syria is the vocational training



(left) Kazin, a tailor who owned his own shop in Karbala, Iraq, was tortured during the Saddam years. Today, he supports his family by sewing women's head coverings. "I want to return to Karbala," he says, "but I know that all my property was taken." Kazin's children are receiving tuition assistance through IOCC's program for Iraqi refugees in Syria. (right) Zena's father was killed in the Iran/Iraq war, and she and her mother fled Baghdad in 2006. Today, she lives in Damascus and takes hair dressing classes through IOCC's program to provide vocational training for Iraqi refugees.



IOCC Baltimore

offered to Iraqi refugees. Several of the components, such as cell phone repair, hair styling and sewing have been redesigned with intensive sessions so that Iraqis, whose living situations tend to be unstable, can complete the courses. This vocational training affords refugees their best chance at finding employment since most of the jobs allow Iraqis to work from their home. Cell phone repair, one of the most in-demand jobs in the Arab world can garner a refugee a monthly wage of up to \$500 per month – an average Syrian salary. The program's component that teaches English is also in demand among Iraqi young people who consider English the "language of business" and who need it to make them better

candidates for immigration to a third country.

A Sign of Solidarity

On that cold day after Christmas, IOCC provided Jeanette and her brother with a hygiene kit. Kazin, of Set Zeinab, also received hygiene kits and tuition assistance for two of his children. While such aid is a long way from completely solving the complex problems of refugees who can neither return to their homeland nor stay permanently in their host country, it is, as Laham puts it, "a sign of solidarity towards vulnerable Iraqis – to both Christians and Muslims. It is certainly our hope that this first major program with IOCC in Syria will be only the beginning of more to come."



Keeping Greek Village Life Alive

Greek Archdiocese/IOCC Partnership Allows Villagers to Sustain Farms and Traditions



Sophia Clark

Vasili lost half his livestock and 85 olive trees to last summer's wildfires in Greece, but he is determined to hold on to his family's farm in Pelopio. As winter approaches, emergency supplies of animal feed from IOCC will help keep his remaining livestock alive.

Peloponnese, Greece — His father is in Patras on kidney dialysis and his wife is in Athens in her fifth month of pregnancy, so Vasili can't spend much time lamenting the loss of half his herd of goats, sheep and some 85 olive trees to last summer's wildfires in Greece. Vasili, 37, had previously finished a 14-month stretch of working 18-hour days in Germany for extra money so that he could return to the village of Pelopio to upgrade his father's farm. "The animals are my tools," says Vasili, "like a taxi driver has a taxi, I had my animals. The trees will grow back but the animals were my daily income."

Like many of the farmers who have received emergency supplies of animal feed from IOCC, Vasili is choosing to remain in one of Greece's rural areas in order to

keep his family business, and an entire way of life, alive. IOCC's recent distribution, over 400 metric tons of animal feed benefiting 130,000 heads of livestock, was made possible through a grant from the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

Niko, his brother and sister are also determined to keep their family farm in the village of Leondari. They lived their childhood years in an era of old-world traditions as their parents and multiple generations before them, wove fabric, sowed and tilled the land by hand. Niko

and his siblings decided to create the "Ecological Footpath," a model of a working farm based on traditional farming techniques. The wildfires devastated their organic stables, their open range pastures, and the structure of their natural amphitheater. IOCC is

helping to keep their livestock alive in the short term and has also given them forage seed so they can replant their grasslands for a long term solution to the problem.

Yianni and his son Kosta of the village of Chelidonia in Ilea Prefecture are working long days to maintain their livelihood. Kosta is picking olives on a farm in a neighboring village although ten of his friends left for Athens after the wildfires to find work. "They had no choice," says Kosta, "they will probably not return." Yianni saved some of his animals during the wildfires but could not salvage the two tons of animal feed he had warehoused. IOCC's donation of feed and Kosta's hard work on the neighboring farm will keep the family going until father and son can rebuild their stable and warehouse.

IOCC's total relief and recovery program for Greece has exceeded \$500,000 and has included distributions of feed totaling 704 metric tons and 20 metric tons of forage seed to allow Greek farmers to permanently restore their grasslands.



NEW GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE \$1.6 MILLION GRANT FOR GREECE

As this issue of *News & Needs* went to press, IOCC learned that the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America had awarded it a \$1.6 million grant to continue its relief and recovery work in Greece. The new grant is expected to serve 2,000 farming families by providing thousands of additional tons of animal feed for hundreds of thousands of livestock in the Peloponnese, as well as more foraging seed to be planted on damaged pasturelands. The seed will help provide a long term solution for keeping livestock alive.

New Initiatives for an Ancient Land

IOCC's Partnership with the Armenian Apostolic Church Enhances Humanitarian Work for Former Soviet Republic

Yerevan, Armenia — Armenia, an ancient Christian land of the southern Caucasus and a former Soviet republic, struggles to move forward from a state-controlled economy and a heavy reliance on subsidies. A devastating earthquake in 1988 coupled with regional disputes with neighboring Azerbaijan and Turkey drain the central government's resources to deal with poverty and unemployment. Recently, IOCC, in cooperation with local partners, the World Council of Churches Armenian Inter-Church Charitable Round Table Foundation (ART), the Armenian Apostolic Church, and Lutheran World Relief (LWR), sent and distributed \$167,000 worth of quilts to hospitals and orphanages throughout the country. IOCC Regional Director Mark Ohanian, an ethnic Armenian and veteran of IOCC programs in Southeastern Europe, talks about the challenges ahead and how IOCC can bring its expertise to Armenia.

News & Needs: What kinds of social issues is Armenia facing?

MARK OHANIAN: After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 90s' Armenia suffered greatly because it was heavily dependent on subsidies from Moscow and raw materials from other Soviet republics. The country's industrial sector is completely outdated. Due to political turmoil, Azerbaijan and Turkey have imposed blockades on Armenia leaving the country with only two small borders with Georgia and Iran. Consequently, it is extremely difficult for Armenian businesses to import and export. Today, Armenia is still bogged down with high unemployment,



IOCC Regional Director Mark Ohanian (above, right) visits agricultural projects in Armenia. The country has struggled to move forward from its Soviet-era economy and a heavy reliance on subsidies. IOCC recently delivered a shipment of quilts worth \$167,000 to hospitals and orphanages throughout the country.

massive rural migration to urban centers and abroad, and the lack of healthcare benefits for the elderly.

News & Needs: Is there concern about a "brain drain" in Armenia?

MARK OHANIAN: Armenians are well known for being skilled traders and businessmen. The country has also produced a great many artists. Armenia is a very singular and self-contained culture and the people pride themselves on the fact that in the 4th century it was the first country to declare Christianity as the state religion. But since 1992, an estimated one million skilled and unskilled professionals have left to seek better education and employment opportunities in Russia, Europe and the U.S.

News & Needs: What kind of development work has taken place in Armenia?

MARK OHANIAN: There are a number of U.S. and international

organizations here that are focusing primarily on infrastructure: road rehabilitation, agriculture, public health clinics and improving hospitals. Many improvements have been made in the capital of Yerevan, but less than 10 kilometers outside the city, you will find no rural or agricultural development.

News & Needs: What makes Armenia a good fit for an organization like IOCC?

MARK OHANIAN: Using a faith-based approach that works closely with the Armenian Apostolic Church is a good fit. Also, although there is a thriving indigenous non-governmental sector, it is mostly concentrated in Yerevan. The civil society and agricultural development programs that IOCC fine-tuned in Bosnia, Serbia, and Romania can be successfully translated to Armenia.



The Principal's Story

A Dedicated Educator And New Equipment From IOCC Make the Difference for A Lebanon Public School

Beirut, Lebanon – In Ain al Remaneh, an East Beirut suburb, there is a public school principal who will do anything for her 300 students. On a day of heavy winter rains, Principal Marie Chahine, bundled in a heavy coat, relates to visitors in her office some of her exploits at the K-9 Chiah Public School for Girls. She convinced her optician son to give the girls free eye exams. She wouldn't admit a development organization into the school until they first repaired all 16 dilapidated bathrooms. And her connections with the municipality have ensured electricity for the school, even during Beirut's now frequent blackouts.

Chahine's creative maneuvering is "survival of the fittest" in a country whose crumbling public schools are hobbled by bureaucracy and a lack of investment by the central government. "If I so much as want to purchase pencils it requires a special letter of permission to the Ministry of Education," says Chahine. A lover of learning, Chahine began her 34-year teaching career in Ain al Remaneh and continued teaching "under the bombs" when Lebanon's civil war began, and the school found itself along the notorious Green Line which separated the eastern and western sectors of Beirut.

During recess in the school's

courtyard her visitors see veiled and unveiled teenage girls dressed in sweat pants line up to run a race. First graders dressed in pink uniforms stand huddled together against the cold as they watch the older girls. Ain al Remaneh had been a predominantly Christian area, but many families fled the civil war. "Today, you will find students of all faiths here," says Chahine, "Shi'a, Sunni, Orthodox, Druze, Maronite – and, thank God, no conflicts between them."

In Lebanon, children from low-income families represent a significant percentage of public school enrollments. As the country's

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(above left) Dedicated educators like Principal Marie Chahine use creative strategies to improve Lebanon's crumbling public schools. Through a \$4.7 million USAID grant, IOCC is providing 206 public schools throughout Lebanon with computer labs and new furniture and laboratory supplies for science instruction. (right) Two of Chahine's students, Farah and Luna, try out the school's new computer lab. IOCC has been developing public schools throughout Lebanon since 2001.

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(continued from page 6)

economy has suffered due to the unstable political situation, more middle-class families now send their children to public schools.

IOCC, working to develop hundreds of public schools in Lebanon since 2001, is currently repairing and developing 206 public schools through a \$4.7 million grant from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Through the Lebanon Education Assistance for Development (LEAD) program, IOCC is installing new computer labs with internet access, and purchasing new furniture and laboratory supplies for science instruction.

IOCC's work in Lebanon has included a major school feeding and nutrition education program through the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and a \$3.7 million grant from the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) to help returnees rebuild their lives in southern Lebanon following the 2006 war.

Chahine says that IOCC's assistance to Chiah has greatly advanced the quality of education offered. "We used to be a traditional school with only theoretical instruction," says Chahine, "but now we have equipment, labs, and technology that allow us to make education more practical."

Chahine's dedication and creative problem solving has helped the school to gain a good reputation among parents in the area. She even has to hire a police officer to control the crowds showing up every year for the first day of registration. "There is a mood in Lebanon that public schools are not good and do not have a good status," says Chahine, "and I want to change that."



Safer Returns to Kosovo



N. Prelevic/IOCC Serbia

"We hope to stay here and start from the beginning. I hope more people will return, and my children will not be alone." Hopeful words from Vinka, pictured above with her husband, Sasa and twin sons. The family recently returned to their hometown in Kosovo after living in central Serbia since the 1999 conflict. With the help of IOCC and Visoki Decani Monastery, the family has received appliances and basic food supplies.

Kosovo and Metohija, Serbia —

"We are here with our sons. We hope to stay here and start from the beginning. I hope more people will return, and my children will not be alone." Hopeful words from a woman named Vinka who returned with her husband and twin eight-year-old sons to their home town of Klina in Kosovo. The family fled Kosovo during the 1999 conflict and lived eight years in central Serbia. Her husband, Sasa, was able to find some construction work, and that plus some humanitarian aid enabled them to rent a modest house. Their dream, however, was to go home, and in September 2007, with no jobs and no prospects for finding work, they returned to Klina.

Nine years after the conflict ended in Kosovo, about 15,000 of the estimated 230,000 internally displaced persons living in Serbia and Montenegro have returned to Kosovo. IOCC Belgrade, in partnership with the Visoki Decani Monastery, recently contributed to the return process of Vinka and Sasa, and two other families, by providing them with household appliances and basic food supplies.

None of the three families have been able to find work, but they say that the moral support of Visoki Decani and IOCC gives them hope. Most are surrounded by ethnic Albanian neighbors who have welcomed them and invited them to their homes. However, the families say they are fearful because of the unresolved status of Kosovo.

"There continue to be serious barriers for minority returns including freedom of movement, access to housing, employment opportunities, public services and the attitude of the receiving community," says IOCC Belgrade Program Manager Nenad Prelevic. "Nevertheless," he continued, "the security situation and the willingness of some local administrations to protect minority returns have improved since 1999 and this has allowed for safer returns."

"Without the support of Visoki Decani, we wouldn't be here at all," said Dragomir, who along with his wife and two children also returned to Klina and received aid from IOCC. "Our whole family would have returned back to central Serbia a long time ago."





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Parish Representatives play a vital role in generating support for IOCC at the parish level in just a few hours per month.

Everything necessary for this job can be provided by IOCC. Send contact information for your parish representative, or questions, to:

Vasi Jankovich
 IOCC Outreach Coordinator
vjankovich@iocc.org

VOLUNTEER IN THE GULF COAST



The Volunteer in the Gulf project of the US Program will resume sending work groups beginning March 2nd through July 26th. The total cost per team member, including transportation, room, and board is \$300 due one month prior to departure. For more information on this program, contact Pascalis Papouras at ppapouras@iocc.org or toll free at 1-877-803-IOCC (4622) or visit our website at www.iocc.org and click on **Get Involved**.



DONATE YOUR CAR TO IOCC

Thinking of trading or selling your old car, boat, or RV? Why not donate it to IOCC instead? IOCC will receive 70% of the net proceeds from the subsequent sale of your vehicle, which will go directly toward the funding of its many humanitarian aid programs, and you will receive a tax deduction.

To learn more about this great opportunity to support IOCC visit our website at www.iocc.org, click on *Giving Opportunities* and then *Vehicle Donation*.

For questions, contact Vasi Jankovich, IOCC Outreach Coordinator at vjankovich@iocc.org or toll free at 1-877-IOCC (4622).