

VOICES FROM SYRIA

A pastoral visit to Damascus, Saidnaya,
Maaloula, Homs and Aleppo



Image: Destruction in Homs

April 2018

Baroness Cox
Revd David Thomas

INTRODUCTION

There are no easy solutions to the problems in Syria. This is partly because there are many different layers to the conflict: the fighting between Government forces and Islamist militias; struggles between Kurds and Turks; and the proxy wars involving other nations. The crisis remains one of the worst humanitarian disasters of our time, resulting in massive internal displacement and outflow of refugees, affecting people of all ethnicities and religions.

This short report of a brief visit is unable to address all of the complexities. It does, however, seek to reflect the priorities of all those with whom we met, including Christian and Muslim religious leaders, the Speaker of Parliament, MPs from many parts of Syria and opposition MPs, internationally-respected artists, musicians and intellectuals, the humanitarian aid organisation St Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee (EPDC) and members of local communities in Damascus, Saidnaya, Maaloula, Homs and Aleppo.

We visited Syria at the invitation of His Holiness Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem, the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch, to observe changes since our previous visit in November 2017, to listen to the concerns of the Syrian people, and to convey their requests.

The day before our departure, the USA, UK and France announced their intention to launch missile attacks in response to the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian Government in Dhouma. We believed that it was especially important to visit Syria at this time to show solidarity with the Syrian people.

MEMBERS OF THE DELEGATION

Members of the group were primarily clergy, accompanied by two members of the House of Lords, several journalists, writers, an artist and a medical doctor. Members paid their own expenses.

Baroness Cox and Revd David Thomas also represent a small NGO, the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART), which works with local partners to provide aid and advocacy for people suffering oppression and persecution. This visit provided an opportunity to establish a relationship with St Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee (EPDC) to initiate a programme helping women to develop entrepreneurial activities in Maaloula.

The report represents the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the rest of the group.

SUMMARY

- **Foreign interference:** All those to whom we spoke passionately believe that Syrians should have the right to determine their own future and to elect their own leadership, without foreign interference.
- **Western airstrikes:** All expressed deep anger at the recent missile attacks by the USA, the UK and France. They question the legality of the attack, stating that it is fundamentally wrong to inflict missile strikes related to alleged chemical warfare before evidence is known and publicised. Moreover, there is real fear that the response by the USA, UK and France may encourage jihadists to initiate a chemical weapons incident in order to stimulate an even more ferocious response by these countries against the Syrian Government.
- **Public opinion:** Many Syrians are disturbed by the tendency of the UK response to be based on past actions and policies of the Assad government, rather than a willingness to confront current realities, including a widespread shift in Syrian public opinion in the face of the religious extremists.
- **Regime change:** There is a great desire for the UK to retract its commitment to an imposed 'regime change'. As there are no longer any 'moderate' armed opposition groups, it is believed that such a policy would be disastrous and create another dire situation comparable to those in Iraq and Libya.
- **Media coverage:** Many asked why the horrendous and well-documented atrocities perpetrated by various jihadist fighting groups, and the appalling scale of those atrocities, are given very little publicity by Western media compared to the focus on actions carried out by the Assad government and armed forces.
- **Cultural heritage:** Syria continues to strive to uphold its long tradition of being a multi-cultural, multi-religious secular State, offering a model different from most other countries in the Middle East. It is suggested that does not suit the interests of the other more totalitarian societies, seen as allies of the West.
- **Sanctions:** Different viewpoints were expressed regarding the effect of economic sanctions. Some claimed they had little effect. The majority maintained that restrictions on the supply of medicines, equipment and raw materials has very serious effects on essential supplies of health care and food – and seriously hampers reconstruction.
- **Reconstruction:** As on our previous visit, we were encouraged by the consistently positive relations between Christians and Muslims in Government-controlled areas. We witnessed numerous cooperative reconstruction projects in regions which have been destroyed by war, including the (re)building of houses, universities, orphanages, medicine factories and historic religious sites.

Statement by Christian leaders in Syria, 14 April 2018
Response to missile attacks by the USA, the UK and France

We, the Patriarchs, condemn and denounce the brutal aggression that took place this morning against our precious country Syria by the USA, France and the UK, under the allegations that the Syrian government has used chemical weapons. We raise our voices to affirm the following:

1. This brutal aggression is a clear violation of the international laws and the UN Charter, because it is an unjustified assault on a sovereign country, member of the UN.
2. It causes us great pain that this assault comes from powerful countries to which Syria did not cause any harm in any way.
3. The allegations of the USA and other countries that the Syrian army is using chemical weapons and that Syria is a country that owns and uses this kind of weapon, is a claim that is unjustified and unsupported by sufficient and clear evidence.
4. The timing of this unjustified aggression against Syria, when the independent International Commission for Inquiry was about to start its work in Syria, undermines of the work of this commission.
5. This brutal aggression destroys the chances for a peaceful political solution and leads to escalation and more complications.
6. This unjust aggression encourages the terrorist organizations and gives them momentum to continue in their terrorism.
7. We call upon the Security Council of the United Nations to play its natural role in bringing peace rather than contribute to escalation of wars.
8. We call upon all churches in the countries that participated in the aggression, to fulfil their Christian duties, according to the teachings of the Gospel, and condemn this aggression and to call their governments to commit to the protection of international peace.
9. We salute the courage, heroism and sacrifices of the Syrian Arab Army which courageously protects Syria and provide security for its people. We pray for the souls of the martyrs and the recovery of the wounded. We are confident that the army will not bow before the external or internal terrorist aggressions; they will continue to fight courageously against terrorism until every inch of the Syrian land is cleansed from terrorism. We, likewise, commend the brave stand of countries which are friendly to Syria and its people.

We offer our prayers for the safety, victory, and deliverance of Syria from all kinds of wars and terrorism. We also pray for peace in Syria and throughout the world, and call for strengthening the efforts of the national reconciliation for the sake of protecting the country and preserving the dignity of all Syrians.

John X, Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and all the East
Joseph Absi, Melkite-Greek Catholic Patriarch of Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem
Ignatius Aphrem II, Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and all the East

MEETINGS: RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Meeting extracts. Names are sometimes withheld in the interests of security in relation to reprisals by extremists.

Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun, Grand Mufti, whose son was killed in the conflict

“We listen to BBC and we see your UK Prime Minister speaking about missiles. Please say to UK and Syrian people that your Government’s bombing of Syria was not right. I don’t want our people to hate your people. I wish your people would come to visit us and tell our stories.

“Some Syrians in UK are fanatics. They have killed people. I hear their voices on UK media. Please ask your Government not to embrace the terrorists. Dangerous Islamists are going back to the UK, including White Helmets.

“My message is this: In Syria, the Government and the people are one. There have been mistakes but these are not remedied by missiles.”

Mufti of Aleppo

“During the battle for Aleppo, the Western media only told one side of story, not what happened in Western Aleppo where a big price was paid: many people were killed, mosques, churches homes and other buildings destroyed.

“In this country we need reforms, like any country. But reforms don’t come with weapons. They are incompatible. We want reforms by talking – not weapons, which kill reforms.”

Other religious and community leaders, Damascus

“I say to the members of the UK House of Lords: ‘You must not just come here but do something. Help to rebuild Syria before it is too late.’

“I ask a question which we in Syria do not understand. We are fighting the terrorists. They wish to do away with all who are different. But whenever the Syrian Army is advancing over the terrorists we receive a strike from the US and Europe. We ask: ‘Are these governments in league with the terrorists?’

“We are sorry for your peoples who are believing what their governments are telling them. We know many of your people do disagree with their governments. It is time for Europeans to open their eyes.

“There was a need for reforms. But we didn’t think reform would come at such a high price. We never expected so much foreign intervention, which caused the violence to escalate.

“We Muslim and Christian leaders always meet. In our communities, Muslims and Christians live together. But those who want to change Syria and bring down the government want to change this. They hate the tolerance of our society. For them, communities should be at war

with one another until there is only one left. What was good in Syrian society is being destroyed by civil war and encouraged by the western powers. We hope their peoples recognise this is an unfair war.”

Maronite Archbishop of Aleppo

“The problem is this: the truth is not told. Christ said ‘The truth will make you free’. The people in Europe are slaves of mainstream media which doesn’t tell truth. You should discover the truth and tell it.”

Roman Catholic Bishop, Aleppo

“In Aleppo, we had months without water. The terrorists tried to destroy our history of 2,000 years, with the theft of archaeological sites. They destroyed what they couldn’t steal. We hope you can help us to rebuild our heritage.

“Syria is a mosaic of different people. In West Aleppo, faith leaders, Muslim and Christian, are under threat. Before the kidnapping of the Bishops, four Muslim leaders were killed. Western media does not tell correctly what is happening in Syria. We have human rights and humanity, so we ask you to report the reality of our suffering and the injustice.

Armenian Protestant Church

“The Syrian Army is freeing much of Syria.

“Armenians are playing a positive role in defending Syria with prayer groups and helping IDPs with medical care in our polyclinics and dental clinics, where we work with six doctors, including Muslims and Arabs. We provide treatment free of charge; many of the patients are Muslims. We also provide school scholarships, clothes, food and books for school students.

“Syria is being attacked by many countries and we need to stay and support our country. Syria has values and attractions and a bright future. Christians need to play key role in peace building or Syria will become dominated by Saudi ideological Wahabis. Also, if we can help Iraq to become a place where fanatics do not take over, we must help the churches there to survive. What happens in Syria and Iraq is very significant for Europe. A Middle East without Christians is dangerous for Europe. Churches have been persecuted over history and survived; we hope to follow historical examples.”

Greek Catholic Priest

“Until Christmas in 2010 Syria was self-sufficient and safe. Everything was good. We were enjoying everything but the political situation was delicate.

“The Iraqi system collapsed because Saddam was a dictator and the people were not ready for democracy. In Syria, Bashar was effecting change from autocracy towards democracy. Bashar is very educated. He is the right person in the right place. He has helped to open Syria up for the people. For example, he introduced cell phones and computers, enabling communication

with other countries. People like him. He is not ruling alone and does not agree with everyone. There may be a need to change personnel.

“We didn’t know some people hate our President. Then people came from many countries including UK, USA, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, enticed by the promise of money, paid by Western countries, including the UK.

“The UK uses the weapons trade for its own interests. Your Government should have compassion. Interests and benefits should not be acquired at the expense of other people. In Syria, we have encouraged peace for centuries. And we don't go to other countries and rip them apart.”



Image: Remains of a Syrian Army tank

MEETINGS: POLITICAL REPRESENTATIVES

Hammouda Sabbagh, Speaker of Parliament

“Missile attacks by USA, UK and France are against international law. They pre-empted the visit by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

“The truth is, we’re fighting terrorists. But your Government is supporting them. At the start of war, terrorists were almost everywhere and now they are almost eliminated. Normal life continues in all Syrian cities and we won’t stop fighting until the terrorists are gone.”

Other Parliamentarians, representing diverse political parties, Damascus

“How can we believe Western governments when they say they are fighting terrorism? We have been attacked financially by sanctions which prevent us from importing supplies for hospitals, aircraft, and equipment for water purification – so much. In hospitals there are many items which are unusable because of sanctions. That’s how you say you have been helping to fight terrorism and now we have suffered the latest missile attack. This is really a comedy and incomprehensible.”

“I’m from Homs and you will hear what happened and how the Syrian Government is rebuilding the town and restoring schools. I’m proud to be Syrian. Unfortunately much of the UK media is supporting aggression against Syria. They should be reporting the experiences of the people in many places where women were enslaved by ISIS; many lost their husbands; some families lost five children.”

“We always hear from West about democracy. But yesterday you bombed as OPCW inspectors arrived.”

“How you can help: stop sanctions; reopen your Embassy; stop attacking us and we can rebuild. We can rebuild our country ourselves.”

“These are our priorities: first, freedom from terrorists; reconciliation; and encouraging refugees to return to homelands; as well as rebuilding – not to return to pre-war situations, but to build a more beautiful Syria. We are strongly united with the Government, leadership and Army. During the recent attack, thousands of people demonstrated in the open, shouting for Assad as he is the real leader of the people.”

“Chemical weapons were found in Ghouta. There was fabrication in front of cameras. The media coverage showed only children and women; helpers were not wearing protective clothing; there was no real chemical attack in Douma. Syria destroyed all Chemical Weapons under supervision of OPCW. The allegations have nothing to do with reality.”

Meeting with the congregation, Syrian Patriarchate Church

“We ask you to convey to your Government the need to respect international law. How can a great power justify aggression against a smaller power?”

Governor of Homs

“I came to Homs in 2013 with my wife and only daughter. Throughout every night, we heard explosions of mortar shells. Many civilians were living in city among armed groups. We saw few people on the streets. The hospitals were always busy with many dead and wounded. There were armed groups with weapons in the centre of the city. All the streets around the city centre were damaged because of missiles from the armed groups.”

“We could still see children going to schools and the University had 20,000 students in spite of bombs.

“We were able, with UN cooperation, to rescue some civilians who were held as hostages by armed groups, achieving this success with direct cooperation of the President. Further negotiations led to more agreements with armed groups. In nine weeks, 850 members of armed groups chose to resign and we received them in a School with medical treatment and legal help so they could return to normal life. Whichever militants not wish to resign for ideological reasons were free to go. By May 2014 Homs was empty of armed groups.



Image: Destruction in Homs

“When the militants left, we asked people to return. Some brought a candle for light. We have given what we could and life is returning to normal. There are now 800 schools. We are optimistic that we will be able to restore normal life with this Government. 21,000 people have returned and we hope there will soon be another 21,000.

“Syria has not attacked other nations with missiles. Syria is under attack by USA and other Western countries not only by missiles but also by sanctions which prevent provision of spare parts for medical equipment and essential services. It is essential to stop sanctions.”

MEETINGS: LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Local man from nearby village, Homs

“On 15 August 2015, three car bombs attacked checkpoints and armed groups attacked our village. In the morning, I and my wife escaped on a motorbike. The terrorists kidnapped 280 people, all Christians; 70 were handicapped. Some were kept for one year until a Dutch organisation paid ransom.”

Lena, a widow, Homs

“In 2012, my husband, an agricultural engineer, was going to work and was shot.”

Local man, Homs

“I was hit with my brother in a car bomb four years ago and I lost one leg. My brother also lost a leg. Another brother was kidnapped five years ago and we still don’t know if he is alive.”

Mother of four children, Homs

“My husband was a taxi driver and was kidnapped with his car four years ago. I still don’t know where he is or if he is alive.”

Local woman, Homs

“My husband was kidnapped three years ago; also a taxi driver. Thousands have been kidnapped.”

Lady from town near Homs

“My town was invaded by Jihadists who killed so many people, including 45 people in one day, before the Syrian Army rescued us.”

Local woman, Homs

“We lived on a chicken farm and every day my husband used to walk away from the farm to throw away dead chickens. He was killed by a mine.”

Local man, Homs

“I was kidnapped by ISIS with three cows. I was tortured and humiliated. I was freed after three months. Now I suffer from an injured back and can’t work. Our house was destroyed and we live with my in-laws.”



Image: Baroness Cox meeting IDPs from East Ghouta

Gym teacher, Homs

“Terrorists used to throw bombs on teachers. They stole my car and occupied our house. Now I’m back and working at school. At first, we had 60 students. Now there are 6,000 students in many schools.”

Pharmacist and President of Orphanage, Homs

“We originally had 70 children. Now we have 300, most of whose parents are dead. The Orphanage was destroyed. Now we also help children in their own homes. We try to make children smile again.”

Local man, Aleppo, a victim of kidnapping

“In October 2012, I was taken by terrorists. They kept me in a dark house and took me somewhere I didn’t know. They took my mobile and interrogated me. I told them I have heart disease and I need medicine. They asked which and I didn’t know so they asked me for the name of my relations so they could get medication and negotiate my release. I gave my son’s name. They demanded 15 million Syrian pounds. I had a warehouse with foodstuff. My family said they would try to bring as much as possible including equipment and 10 million pounds. At midnight they called my son and said there was no need to send supplies from the warehouse because they had already emptied it. They ordered him to bring 5 million pounds in three days, or they would kidnap him and his nine-year-old son. I had an insurance company and was prepared to pay the ransom. My son feared he and his son would be kidnapped so

they fled to Beirut. The kidnappers then threatened to kidnap my daughter and grandchildren and threatened they would put me in a car bomb against Syrian Army. I paid the ransom in three days. I called my wife who said we had sold everything to pay the ransom. They took the money, returned mobile and left me on highway, blindfolded.”

Local man, Aleppo, a victim of kidnapping

“They came to my shop on 1 May 2016. My family were present and they killed my two children killed and wounded my leg.”

MEETINGS: ARTISTS, MUSICIANS AND INTELLECTUALS

Author, Damascus

“The Syrian Army is winning on the ground. It would be illogical for them to use Chemical Weapons.

“The UK needs to reconsider and stop supporting Saudi Arabia which supports terrorists along with other Gulf countries. After East Ghouta was liberated, we found that the hospitals in hands of terrorists had the most modern equipment which we are not allowed to import and medicines which were not given to civilians, only to armed groups. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are supporting the armed groups with all these supplies to help them to win. When the Syrian Army came to East Ghouta, the people were relieved and welcomed them. The President visited them and this had a big effect as the people know they are not forgotten. We are rebuilding, opening hospitals and bakeries to serve the people.”

Opposition journalist, Damascus

“I think Theresa May will soon apologise like Tony Blair.

“I pity the British people because you became a victim to your media. Many people are affected by Gulf State and Saudi money and your country is in danger from terrorists. Therefore beware for your country.”

Former judge, Damascus

“What is the reason for the hatred of other countries towards us and our leader? My son was killed by bullet. Many young people have been kidnapped and disappeared. We have family in Dhouma and all my family, except two, were killed. What is their guilt?”

Former director, Syrian TV

“The BBC and mainstream Western media have been showing only one side of truth. Sanctions hurt the Syrian people. Sanctions never took a regime down. If anyone says sanctions do not apply to food and medicine, tell them they are lying. There are severe shortages. Many babies are dying from lack of essential supplies.”

Artist

“I was invited to show my work in the West but the invitation was rescinded because I was suspected of supporting the regime. In the area where I live, I lost many neighbours. We couldn't go outside for three months because of bombs. But on the news, we only hear about bombs being dropped on the other side. Two weeks ago, we were celebrating peace and next day a bomb fell on stadium where children were training. Two were killed and others injured.”

Architect

“Governments in the UK and USA know our present Government would be elected overwhelmingly. We should not be discredited by Western media but challenge them. Shame on the West! Truth is truth and Western media should not be allowed to distort it.”

Tom Duggan, Anglo Syrian Press, Damascus

“I support Assad as without him the country would fall apart. In one village in 2014 there was a ‘purge’ and Al Nusra women’s lips were chopped off for wearing lipstick and many women were executed. One man had his fingertips chopped off for smoking; there was brutal treatment of Christians including crucifixion and murder of babies.

“Two months ago Damascus suffered serious missiles attacks from jihadists in East Ghouta using new warheads and cluster bombs, white phosphorus and napalm. Damascus has been shelled incessantly from Dhouma, targeting hospitals, schools, and even busy crossroads. Large numbers of people have been killed and injured.

“37 people were killed in one day. I lost 29 friends on one day with suicide bomber who killed 17 solicitors, friends of my wife, 3 months ago. I have been here for 5 years and seen people die every day and the Syrian Army helping people.

“In East Ghouta there are munitions factories and chemical factories using white phosphorus and napalm. There is a foundry making small to large mortars. Everything is booby trapped. 3,000 hostages were taken to Dhouma. They were used as slave labour to dig tunnels. Only 200 of those 3,000 survived. Their release was negotiated as part of an agreement for the evacuation of jihadist militants. 12 buses of terrorists passed us, free, with rifles. In East Ghouta, jihadists shelled people as escaping.

“In the battle in Eastern Aleppo, the Syrian Army treated jihadists with respect. The Syrian economy has been raped by Turkey, which destroyed the power station in East Aleppo, and stole from the pharmaceutical and chemical factories: theft on huge scale.

“The White Helmets were set up in Turkey in 2014. James Le Mesurier, contractor to FCO, founded a medical organisation but many staff not trained medics. They only have pain killers and propaganda.”

Local medical doctor, Aleppo

“In 2016, the University Hospital and other hospitals were destroyed with 29,000 casualties including 4,000 children. Sanctions deeply affect care and need to be lifted.”

President of Doctors’ Union in Aleppo

“The terrorists and other armed groups carried out massive destruction. The medical sector was deliberately destroyed, including the University Hospital from which they stole millions of dollars of equipment. Missiles were launched by terrorists on another hospital not far from here. Three women in childbirth were killed as well as female doctors and nurses. Many doctors and health workers were killed going to work and at work in hospitals.

“I am surprised that US and UK talk about human rights but impose sanctions which deny treatment to people with cancer and other potentially fatal conditions.”

Deputy President of the University of Aleppo

“Our University has teaching and research missions. In the war years, both were affected by the risk for staff and students travelling to the University, which was hit by missiles and shells on all buildings. Many staff, students and professionals have been killed. Research has been damaged by embargo sanctions stopping supplies of equipment. But Syrians love science and education so we will continue.”

Lawyer representing Governor of Aleppo

“We welcome you to the land and city of civilisation and heritage. Aleppo was deliberately destroyed. It served as the Syrian economic and industrial capital and we have concerns for the reconstruction of Aleppo.

“Our message is one of national unity – it is a symbol of reality. Please take this truth to your people and your Government.”

Professor of International Relations

“Syria is a source of civilisation. Of the five oldest inhabited cities in the world, three are in Syria.

“Three issues:

- 1: Unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity are priorities under the leadership of the President who is committed to a united Syria.
2. Survival of Eastern Christianity. We fear it will become extinct.
3. Reforms are needed. There is corruption in country, state, religious arenas, everywhere. But there is corruption in every country. We can achieve reform, given appropriate remedies.

“If terrorists attack London, you require research to know what reality happened. Europeans are more civilised than us. So why do you not investigate the whole truth and only listen to one side? Why not come to visit us? The ethics of Western politics are deteriorating.

“Young people fled country because of lack of security, so must stop terrorists with money and arms. The greatest martyr is the truth - so please restore this.”

MEETINGS: SAIDNAYA

Saidnaya is an historic Christian town located in the mountains, north of Damascus. It was attacked in 2012 by 2000-3000 Islamist militants with tanks and advanced weaponry. Up to 300 local people formed an ad hoc popular committee in response to the attack, 30 of whom were killed. After three days of intense conflict, the committee repelled the attack and saved Saidnaya from occupation.

His Holiness the Patriarch and the clergy described how nuns and other Christians prayed, whilst anticipating an attack by ISIS. The prayer focussed on two priorities: Forgiveness for those who were attacking them; and that they would not deny their faith whatever happened to them.

A young priest described how he had been kidnapped by Islamist militants, beaten, imprisoned for 118 days in harsh conditions and how, on three occasions, a Jihadist had put a knife to his throat, threatening to kill him. There were many other prisoners being held including 272 women, among whom a baby was born.

MEETINGS: MAALOULA

A Christian town which had been captured by Islamist jihadists and liberated by the Syrian Army. Under jihadist control, there was widespread desecration of holy sites and destruction of buildings. Three men were martyred for refusing to convert to Islam and six young men were kidnapped. Five of their bodies have been found, with evidence of severe torture; the whereabouts of the sixth is still unknown.

The town is being rebuilt and people are being encouraged to return.

HART is establishing a partnership with EPCD, supporting a programme to help to empower women by facilitating food production through the preserving of fruit and other produce such as mushrooms. We met two of the women who are helping to establish the project: Marie Shaheen and Zakia Kasis.

Zakia told us: “We were in the village when the war started. We had to flee and could not return for eight months. When we returned, we found Al Nusra had stolen everything and destroyed homes and churches. Our homes were burnt and we were left with nothing.”

Zakia has a husband and three children, and is working in the monastery. Her son was working in Lebanon but returned to support the Army. Her husband has heart problems; he also needs

an eye operation. Appropriate medication is not available here but can be bought in Damascus.

Marie has four children. One is studying at university but also works as a teacher because there is an acute shortage of teachers. Another son is studying engineering. Her husband works in stone-dressing the walls in construction work.

There are 15-20 women working on the project. They use the money they earn to buy more supplies and to prepare more products for sale. The Mushroom Project is in need of funding, including two rooms in which to grow the mushrooms.

MEETINGS: CAMP FOR IDPs FROM EL GHOUTA

Introduction by Camp Commandant

“This Accommodation Centre serves 5,000 IDPs who arrived on 16 March. The Government made this and other Centres available. Many NGOs are working here, together with the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Syrian Red Crescent, UNICEF and ICRC. The Syrian Army provides security and the Ministry of Education provides education. This is only a temporary stay until the people can return to homes. They are here while we check their records. If any are found to have a bad record, we discuss their details and we are working on reconciliation. Many have homes which have been destroyed. Work is being undertaken to rebuild them.”



Image: Spring flowers, a symbol of hope in Homs

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank very warmly all who worked so hard to fulfil the complex programme and who provided generous Syrian hospitality.

We also wish to record our profound gratitude to all who shared their experiences and concerns, especially those for whom such sharing involved the pain of recounting tragic personal accounts of their suffering.

We hope that we will do justice to them and that our report will increase understanding of the current situation in Syria, promoting more responses from the international community which are sensitive to the needs of the people, their yearning to be allowed to determine their own future, to rebuild the land, to restore their rich cultural heritage and to maintain the pluralism which has been their cherished tradition over so many centuries.