

Syrian refugee crisis hits neighboring countries

by [Richard A. Kauffman](#) in the [April 17, 2013](#) issue

After two years of civil war, the Syrian refugee crisis is reaching a boiling point. The United Nations estimates that 2.3 million Syrians are displaced within Syria and that another million have fled to Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt according to Daryl Byler, a Middle Eastern representative of the Mennonite Central Committee.

The refugees flee to escape violence, mayhem and lack of housing and infrastructure. In the case of women and girls, rampant rape by armed men is also a cause for flight. Over 75 percent of the Syrian refugees in Jordan are women and children. Many of the refugees have been traumatized as a result of the conflict.

The efforts of UN and other relief agencies are hampered greatly by chaotic political developments.

On the weekend of March 23–24, the U.S.-backed Syrian opposition leader Moaz Khatib, a moderate Islamist who has championed national reconciliation, resigned his position, according to the *Los Angeles Times* and other news agencies. Meanwhile, the government of Lebanon collapsed, at least in part over the turmoil in neighboring Syria despite the outgoing prime minister's attempt to keep the government neutral. Lebanon's two major political camps are on opposite sides of the Syrian war.

About 30 percent of the refugees who flee Syria settle in refugee camps, at least temporarily. Most of the rest become urban refugees, usually living in cramped facilities and sometimes in squalor.

Jordan, a country of 6.5 million, many of whom fled other conflicts in the region and include Palestinians and Iraqis, contains more than 400,000 Syrian refugees. On average more than 2,100 Syrians cross the border into Jordan each night. Sometimes they are attacked by Syrian soldiers.

The Jordan army picks up these refugees at the border in buses and transports them to the Za'atari Refugee Camp, six miles from the Syrian border. If they can find a Jordanian citizen to sponsor them, they may leave the camp. Otherwise, they must stay in the camp, which is patrolled by Jordanian security forces. The camp has become so large, and its resources are so minimal, that most of the refugees do not live within walking distance of schools or medical facilities, officials say.

The high altitude desert where the camp is located is cold and wet in the winter. Summers are hot and can produce sandstorms.

"The influx of refugees is straining Jordan's budget and infrastructure and, in some cases, increasing social tensions between the refugees and Jordanian host communities," said Byler. The large influx of Syrians in urban areas is driving up rents and food costs and driving down low-end wages, he said.

Tensions between the host country and the refugees led Caritas Jordan to add a peace-building element to its work. The humanitarian organization is training teams of Syrian refugees and Jordanians to seek nonviolent means of resolving conflicts.

When President Obama visited Jordan briefly in March, he promised King Abdullah that he would ask the U.S. Congress for more aid for Jordan to help with the refugee crisis. Via the UN \$1.4 billion of aid was promised in January to countries dealing with Syrian refugees. The challenge, officials say, is to get countries that made these pledges to follow through.

As bad as things are in Jordan, Andrea Koppel, vice president of Global Engagement and Policy for Mercy Corps, said the situation is worse in Lebanon. The number of refugees who have flooded the country is roughly equivalent to 20 percent of the population. Lebanon has not established any refugee camps. There is widespread price gouging, Koppel said.

For security reasons, NGOs working with displaced Syrians within Syria are reluctant to talk about their work. However, Michael Young, regional director of the Middle East International Rescue Committee, said one sign of hope is the fact that Syrians have a very robust civic life.

Yet one relief official said she could not counter the lament of a refugee in the Za'atari Refugee Camp: "How will we be a country? We have nothing, nothing to go back to."