

Help suffering Syrian refugees stay in the region says Catholic leader



Bringing refugees from Syria to the West is not the answer to the crisis, according to the leader of Catholics in the disaster-stricken country, who says more can be done to help displaced people both there and elsewhere in the Middle East.

Patriarch Gregorios III

While sympathising with refugees who seek a new life in the West, Damascus-based Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch Gregorios III of Antioch urged that aid programmes be boosted both within Syria and in neighbouring countries to enable them to stay in the region.

Re-asserting the calls of many Middle East Church leaders for Christians and others to stay in the region, Patriarch Gregorios said that there would be little chance of them returning if they were given asylum in countries such as the UK, the USA and Australia.

Speaking in an interview on Monday, 27 January with Aid to the Church in Need, Patriarch Gregorios said: "It is better to help the [destitute] people within the country or the region and not invite them to go outside. Of course, we cannot decide for ourselves what response our people should make, the suffering is so great, but the real answer is to provide more help – more relief – on the spot and not outside which will encourage them to leave. But if they must go, we understand their situation."

He added: "The danger is that if they leave the region of the Middle East, they will never go back. This applies to other groups as well as the Christians."

The Patriarch's comments come a day after UK Foreign Secretary William Hague said the British Government was actively considering a plan to accept "particularly vulnerable" Syrian refugees into the country. He has now confirmed that a limited number of refugees will be allowed to come to Britain. But, speaking in a BBC interview, Mr Hague has stressed that the UK government's "main effort" remains helping destitute people in and around Syria.

Patriarch Gregorios said that, in spite of the overwhelming pressures on Jordan, Turkey and other countries neighbouring Syria, it remains possible to step up aid programmes there. He said: "There is more that can be done locally – within the region."

Giving an example of increased aid provision, he said the number of families receiving help from his patriarchate in Damascus was up from 300 to 3,000 within a few months.

Appealing for more help, the Patriarch said: "Daily the suffering is getting worse, daily the problems are growing. The level of suffering is much greater than the aid provided."

The Patriarch's comments come amid no sign of a breakthrough in the Geneva II peace conference in Switzerland where Government representatives have had acrimonious exchanges with Opposition groups.

The Patriarch, who earlier this month launched an international prayer campaign for the success of Geneva II, said that it was important to "keep praying and remain hopeful" despite the setbacks in the discussions. He added: "It is really very important that the US and Russia and Europe have one common vision, this can help the two groups [Syrian Government and Opposition] go ahead. When the big countries are divided, it means the others will be too. What matters is that we have a local, Syrian solution to the problem."

The Patriarch went on to repeat calls for an end to the import of arms into Syria – especially those ending up in the hands of Jihadist and other extremist groups. He said: "The killings, kidnappings and other crimes must be put aside. Then the atmosphere will be free for more discussions between the Government and the Opposition."

The Patriarch concluded by thanking Aid to the Church in Need and other organisations for their help. As well as aiding the families supported by Patriarch Gregorios's Church, Aid to the Church in Need is helping displaced people from Homs and the surrounding Valley of the Christians as well as ongoing grants for refugees turning to clinics run by the Good Shepherd Sisters.

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