

## ChildFund supporting European refugees

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ChildFund Alliance is supporting children and families on their way to Europe from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. Next to the border controls in Macedonia and Serbia, contemporary aid stations have been constructed where people can stop to receive medical support, warm clothes and food. In cooperation with Terre des Hommes, ChildFund is supporting a local partner, providing children and families with friendly spaces and psychosocial support. In the child friendly spaces children can play and parents can change their babies' diapers and receive counselling in both practical matters, and how they can protect their children from danger such as getting lost along the road.

Carolina Ehrnrooth, CEO of ChildFund Sweden (Barnfonden) visited Macedonia last month to see the program and this is what she witnessed;

In Tabanovce in northern Macedonia, next to the Serbian border, NGO staff stand lined up when the trains arrive from Gevgelija in south Macedonia next to the Greek border. Uncountable numbers of people gather on the platform, some of them seem to be happy, others look tired and lost. There are many families with children, groups of young men, some elderly and some disabled people. People are assisted off the train and shown where to go next. A few refugees only say "Doctor, doctor" and point at their sick children. A few of the women say "Pampers" and point at their infants; they are in need of diapers. In just a moment, the whole place has turned into chaos.

Mazen is 15 years old and travels together with his uncle, who is 19. They are from Syria and want to go to Germany where their relatives live. They have a phone number, but they don't know in what city their relatives live. With the help of a translator, Mazen tells me that he hasn't been in school for the past five years. He left school after third grade. After that he has helped to supply his family through selling vegetables. He is the oldest child in his family, and the only one they could afford to send away.

"If I had stayed, the risk of me being forced into the Syrian army would have been high," he says.



In school, Mazen's favourite subject was biology. In Germany he hopes to continue his studies and complete his education.



17 year-old Amani has arrived from Aleppo in Syria. She travels together with her cousins and they are on their way to Malmö where her brother lives. She speaks a little English and tells me that she wants to complete high school in Sweden, so that she can continue to study. Like many others, she has parts of her family left in Syria.

"I'm very sad that I have to leave my home country," she says.

The local NGO that manages the children's shelter that Barnfonden supports is called 'La Strada'. The staff consists of social workers and psychologists, who work in shifts in groups of eight people. In each group there is a translator, someone who knows Arabic. Families are offered to come to La Strada's tent, a chilly playroom for children. In a moment of time, it's filled of mothers and their children and, occasionally, a father. The staff are playing with the children, they're drawing and they do arts and crafts.

"The children need to relax and be allowed to be children. We provide a place that is only for the children, where they can play and think of something else," says the social worker Aleksandar Mitanovski.



*A freezing playroom*

Eight year old Nur from Mosul in Iraq is playing together with her parents in a big group of people from the same city. They are going to Germany. She says that she used to go to school, and that she enjoyed it.

"But it was sad to leave our home, and many of my friends are still there," she says.



Mothers are changing their babies' diapers on blankets on the floor because the only changing table is always occupied. They are provided with hygiene supplies and winter clothes, practical advice on

how they can protect their children, for example through teaching them theirs, and their parents' full names, and that they should put labels with contact information inside their children's clothes if they are separated.

### **No transport across the border**

After some time, most of the people are gathering their things because they are moving on. We follow them as long as we can, approximately 700 meters towards the Serbian border. After crossing the border, they have to walk another four kilometers by foot in the sunny but cold and windy weather to a village where they can take a bus. The pathway looks like a broader trail and continues into Serbia. Everyone has to walk by foot, except those who are in a wheelchair or have to be carried on a mattress. A Syrian family ask if it's far to go. The mother and the father carry a small child each, a pair of one year-old twins, and two children that seem to be around four or five years old walk next to them. An exodus of adults and children slowly disappears into Serbian territory. There are parents holding their children's hands or carrying them in their arms, together with bags and rucksacks. A Syrian woman with four children tells me before she crosses the border, that she wants to give her children freedom and a brighter future.



Today, about 3000 refugees arrive each day (in 24 hours), different to in September when the numbers were around 6000-7000 each day. According to the staff at La Strada, the composition of people is different now compared to before. In September the majority were young men; today, about half of the people are women and children. At least four trains arrive every day, and on almost each train there are a few unaccompanied children. Three weeks ago people still arrived from Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Morocco and Iran. Today, there are only people from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.

"Many of those who arrive are confused and don't know the rules here," says La Strada's programme manager, Marija Todorovska.



Human smuggling is not unusual. Recently, a group of people who had paid a large amount of money to be transported in a train goods wagon arrived. They were locked inside the wagon, and might not have been discovered if the staff had not heard people crying for help when the train arrived at the station. They called the police who broke up the lock, and about 60 refugees from Afghanistan, among them women and children crawled out. They were shocked and scared and dazed from the lack of air inside the truck.