

Letter from Aleppo No 12 (17 July 2013)

Where are things 2 and a half years after the beginning of the events in Syria and one year exactly after the beginning of the war in Aleppo? our friends abroad may be wondering.

At the national level, nothing has changed, the 2 parties continue to confront each other with no clear winner or loser at a cost of 100,000 killed, a million refugees in the neighbouring countries, 2-3 millions internally displaced, hundred of thousands who have emigrated, an economy in ruins, sectarianism and extremism flourishing and no glimmer of hope for a settlement of the conflict. Following the retaking of Qoussair (a little town in the centre of Syria) by the Syrian army and the defeat of the rebels there, the leaders of the Western world declared that the fall of Qoussair showed that the balance of force had shifted to the government side and that it was necessary for them to arm the rebels in order to re-establish the balance!!! A very fine programme: one is not looking to win, one is not resigned to defeat, one simply wants to re-establish the balance so that the two parties can continue to fight... to the last Syrian?

In Aleppo, the military situation is in status quo; the last battle took place 100 days ago with the taking of the Cheikh Maksoud (Djabal Al Sayde) quarter by the rebels. There have been no combats since, but bombardments here and there.

On the other hand, the humanitarian situation is catastrophic with 2 important facts:

- 1- The blockade of Aleppo* has lasted now for 15 days; blockade of persons, no one can leave the city to go elsewhere, to other Syrian towns or abroad. Blockade of merchandise, nothing can get into Aleppo. There are no more vegetables, fruit, milk, cheese meat, chicken or fish, no fuel, gas (for cooking) and very little bread. There remain only imperishable supplies at the grocers such as rice, lentils, tinned goods... but at astronomical prices the majority cannot afford. It must be said that one dollar was worth 50 Syrian pounds before the events, 180 Sp. a month ago and 300 Sp. today. The kitchen of the charitable association Al Ihssan which provided daily

meals for 35,000 displaced has closed for lack of gas and the JRS one, which provides 15,000 daily will close soon. 50,000 displaced will be without food. Without fuel, vehicles cannot move and the forced march has become the sport of the Aleppans; it would be good for the health if the median temperature was not 40 degrees! The inhabitants have waited in vain for the protests of Western opinion (so prompt at protesting over the slightest offence) and the pressure of its leaders (machievellian) on the rebels to raise the blockade. It is no longer a question of a military or political problem but a humanitarian cause. To starve a population of 2 million persons is logically equivalent to a crime against humanity for those who believe in peace and justice. To be silent is to accept the rule of Western politicians of 2 weights, 2 measures.

- 2- Mortar fire: Every day, mortar shells fall on the quarters inhabited especially by Christians. Fired by the rebels, they are homemade but still cause some deaths and dozens of seriously wounded. Last week, a boy of 14, scout in the Marist Brothers' troop, died from a piece of shrapnel in his head while he was at home, a girl of 8 also received a splinter in the brain, a young woman of 30, a hairdresser, had a hand torn which had to be amputated, a man of 70 was wounded in the spine when he was coming out of Mass: these are a few examples among many other dramas.

In this context of violence, privation, desolation, suffering and despair, we continue, we **Marist Blues**, through our presence, our resistance, our accompaniment, our aid and our solidarity to be , for the people, a glimmer of hope in the darkness that surrounds us. What! you are still there, you have not left like the others? And we continue our action with the displaced, the deprived, and the wounded.

I would first like to present to you a project already undertaken about which we have never informed you. It is the project «**War Wounded**». It is about caring (gratuitously) for the civilians affected by war wounds (bullets, shrapnel...) and who do not have the means to be cared for in the private hospitals. These people

are usually taken to the public hospitals (there are now only 2, the others having been destroyed or put out of operation) which cruelly lack doctors, nurses and medical equipment. The care is of mediocre quality and the mortality high. We transfer these wounded to the Saint Louis Hospital (the best in Aleppo) where they are operated on and cared for with the best chances of survival. The doctors and surgeons (the most competent in the city) offer their services free and the Sisters of St Joseph of the Apparition, owners of the establishment since its foundation in 1925, apart from their love and quality nursing care, offer a substantial reduction for hospital expenses. The deprived civilians cared for in other hospitals are also taken in charge by the project. We have thus been able to save up to now 18 civilian war wounded. This project was initiated by the Marist Blues some months ago and financed by an international organisation which decided to stop the funding 2 months ago. We, the Marist Blues, have taken complete charge of it with the collaboration of the hospital's doctors and the Sisters.

As before, the **displaced** have always had their place with the **Marist Blues**. 23 displaced Christian families (our maximum capacity for hospitality) from Djabal Al Sayde lodge with the Brothers; we are completely responsible for them: food, accommodation, clothing, medical care, psychological accompaniment, etc.



The other families of Djabal frequently come to us to ask for help, advice, medicines, clothes or to pay a visit.

The displaced Moslem families of the schools of Cheikh Maksoud come every Monday to receive a basket of supplies.



We are still hosting 20 young Moslem girls, university students, (before we had some young girls coming to sit for their high school leaving certificate) who live in the areas occupied by the rebels and who are in the city to sit their exams.

We continue with our project **«the Mountain Basket»** which is in its 12th month. A monthly food basket sufficient to feed a family for a month is distributed to 300 of the poorest families in Aleppo.

The different projects of our association **«the Ear of God»** continue. 70 families of the Midane quarter whom we accompanied well before the events are still receiving monthly help with food and free medical care.



«Learn to grow» for the little ones from 4 to 7, with its 8 supervisors, continues to make about 40 children happy. **«Skills School»** for the adolescents gives contentment to 30 boys and girls. And finally, **«Tawassol»** is destined for 2 groups of 6 adults each to teach them computing, a foreign language, and pedagogy.

Our places are full of life : the displaced who live there, the displaced on visit, the people asking for help, the children of «learn to grow», the young people of «Skills School», the adults of «Tawassol», sometimes the scouts of the Champagnat troop and the sick who come to consult the medical clinic open every afternoon; with, in the background, the noise of the thunder of guns and the whistling of bullets. Not forgetting the tanker which stops each day in the middle of the yard to fill our water tanks and our little lorry which returns several times a day full of supplies and merchandise (such as can be found) purchased or received.

In the evening, about 9 pm, when calm returns, we meet to evaluate our day, take decisions, reply to mail and share. And with you I would like to share some beautiful **gestures of solidarity** that we have experienced recently.

- Y.S., a youth of 19 was transferred in a critical state to the St Louis Hospital, struck by a bullet which perforated the lung, wind pipe and neck. Placed in intensive care, with artificial ventilation, he was operated on by the greatest thoracic surgeon of Aleppo (who is part of the team of the « War Wounded » project and so will not touch any fee). His state improved but remained critical. That evening, the surgeon and the resuscitating doctor refused to go home and spent the night at the hospital so as to be present if the young patient's situation deteriorated during the night.
- G.Z., a displaced from Djabal Al Saydé, without work, and who lives with us in community with his family of 5, received a gift of 4000 Sp. from his church. This amount is barely enough for the little daily expenses of the family. He wanted to give us 1000 Sp. to share in the purchase of bread which has reached dizzying heights because of the blockade.

So that is where we are. We are trying to resist despite all; resist after exactly one year, 365 days of war. Resist pessimism, fatigue, discouragement and extremism. As our great friend Jean Debruyne** said, «To resist, is never to give up looking out for the sun through the opening of a sewer outlet» or again «To resist, is to be stubborn enough to see the day arise behind the barbed wire».



Nabil Antaki

For the Marist Blues

Aleppo 17/7/2013

* At the moment of sending this letter, it seems that the blockade is slightly alleviated or has been circumvented a bit.

** Jean Debruyne was a priest of the Mission de France. Poet and author, he accompanied many movements, including The Scouts and Guides of France, Sharing and Meeting, etc.