

In 2010, I visited Syria as the Chair of the Canadian branch of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA Canada). The country's beauty, the friendly relations between Christians and Muslims, and the tranquility there struck me. No one I met would have imagined that the country would slip into a vicious civil war only a few months later.

We are now in the sixth year of this violent conflict that affects Syria and the surrounding countries. Words fail to describe the recent U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees findings. The report lists more than 400,000 deaths, 4.8 million refugees, and 7 million internally displaced persons out of a population of 22 million.

However, the faces of these suffering people reached us in an unexpected way last September. A picture of the toddler Alan Kurdi, found dead on a beach in Turkey, appeared on our front pages. He represented the thousands of desperate individuals and families who risk their lives on boats headed to the shores of Europe or further for a better life. More than 2,500 of them have died so far in 2016 in the Mediterranean Sea trying to reach Europe.

The ensuing wave of sympathy led to the campaign to receive 25,000 Syrian refugees into Canada. The City of Ottawa generously did its share, as have several parishes of the Archdiocese of Ottawa, in welcoming refugees. These families now have a second chance at living a normal life in peace, security, and hope. This great act of mercy has shown how compassionate Canadians are when an international crisis comes. We can be proud of this as we celebrate our national holiday this weekend.

With no peace in sight, though, thousands more will be leaving the Middle East for good. Is Canada open and ready to welcome another wave of Syrian refugees in 2016–17? Should Syrian refugees have priority over other refugees from Eritrea and Iraq?

Let's be frank. There will be more refugees knocking on everyone's doors. Already, refugee camps are full and miserable. Welcoming countries like Jordan and Lebanon have exhausted their resources. The local populations are running out of patience.

According to the Holy See, Catholic charities around the world have generated an amazing US\$150 million in aid in 2015 to address the Iraqi and Syrian humanitarian crisis. This emergency relief effort has helped 3 million people. However, even this is far from enough and it's an achievement that will be hard to replicate in 2016 and 2017.

As well, we need to keep in mind that ISIS is still strong despite being heavily bombarded. Defeating ISIS will only happen if there is the political will to build a lasting peace in Syria and Iraq. However, the peace process is now being influenced by many other complex factors.

Pope Francis has said many times in the last year that political leaders seem more interested in petroleum and arms than in the wellbeing of people. He added, "While they speak of peace and justice, they permit the traffickers in death to operate in that land."

We need to acknowledge the role of the new Liberal government in the welcome Canada has extended to recent refugees. Now, our leadership should feel obliged to continue its involvement in the peace process for Syria.

While waiting for peace, organizations like CNEWA are endeavouring to provide the basics for the millions who are longing and waiting to return home. These good works depend on the generosity of the thousands of Canadians who care. As Canadians continue to welcome these many new refugees, let's not forget the needs of the ones left behind.