



The Association for Trauma Outreach & Prevention (ATOP)

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Impact of Syrian War: Reflections of Children Displaced in Armenia

ATOP Meaningfulworld has taken the first step to assess the needs of a community of children displaced by conflict in Syria. Your ongoing support ensures these children can rebuild a stable life.

Katherine Kaze and Dr. Ani Kalayjian

SYRIA- In 2011, protests against President Bashar al-Assad's regime sparked a civil war whose death toll has since risen beyond 100,000. As violence escalated, a succession of third party groups joined the fray, including jihadist groups and neighboring governments. Many of those with the means to do so have since fled to other territories. This includes a large Syrian Armenian population, based mainly in Aleppo, whose roots derive from the migration associated with the Turkish occupation and Genocide of Armenia in the early 20th Century. According to a United Nations estimate, 2 million refugees have since fled the nation, with $\frac{3}{4}$ of that figure identified to be women and children. Another 4 million remain displaced inside the country as death tolls continue to rise.

Seated at the front of a modest classroom of in Yerevan, Armenia, the 23 fresh faces before us contained no trace of the violence of their previous environment. Aged 7 to 9, these students had all arrived at the Nar Dos School in District 14 of the city to continue their studies in Arabic until the conflict seemed as though it would find some resolution. Many had arrived between 6 months to a year before Meaningfulworld's visit. As the conflict worsened, the children had been divided into existing Armenian classes at the appropriate level to begin integrating into the education system and assume courses taught in the Armenian language – it had become clear that there would be nothing to return to back home.

The goal of Meaningfulworld's outreach at the Nar Dos School was to form a collaborative relationship with staff in order to access and treat the mental health and general status of the displaced children. We arrived at the school with various supplies and gifts for the children, introducing ourselves with a lecture on the negative emotions derived from stress. Applying the 7 Step Model, we engaged the children about their experiences in Armenia and found responses to be enthusiastic and open among all participants.



The most frequently expressed negative emotions were worry, anxiety, and embarrassment. Students reported their fears about being late to school, and not doing well in the new school environment. It was evident that several felt uncomfortable with the use of the Eastern Armenian

language (as the Western Armenian is used in Syria, as well as the majority of the diaspora), continuing to make their requests to the team in Arabic when words in Armenian did not readily surface to their memory. As conversation progressed, one girl (9 years of age) stated that her brother had begun to physically bully her after their relocation, causing her to seek help from her parents. Several others expressed a longing for home in Syria. Another female student stated “I am sorry that I am sitting here while my friends are still in Syria. I wish they could be here with me”. In general, the children seemed well adjusted. They demonstrated familiarity and comfort among each other, and it appeared they had established a support structure within their small group.

To encourage the flow of ideas, paper and crayons were distributed among the children. In lieu of psychological surveys, which are geared toward adult understanding, we utilized their drawings. This method was originally introduced in 1926 by Florence Goodenough, a child psychologist who asked children to draw a picture of a man, of a woman, and of themselves and used the results to evaluate their psychological development. In this case, the students were requested to draw “a place where they feel safe” as a means of identifying the items that they currently associated with security and stability in their new environment.



The majority of participants drew their homes in Armenia, or places associated with home or school, such as a football field, a garden by their home, and an amusement park. Approximately 1/5 of the students drew their homes in Syria and expressed a yearning to go back home. In a discussion that followed the presentation of the drawings, teachers elaborated that three out of 23 children displayed fears, jumpy feelings, and hyper-vigilance in the classroom. The team distributed Bach remedies for shock and trauma and grief especially for children donated by

Nelson Distributers, followed by a series of yoga and breathing exercises.



Examples of the children's drawings: (Left) An Armenian garden, (Center) a home in Syria, (Right) a child at home in Armenia

Following our meeting with the children, we held a meeting with the Principal Arusyak Barseghyan to discuss the needs of the students. Arusyak expressed the dearth of supplies within the school, specifically chalkboards, chalk, and gym equipment.. Plans to continue a collaborative relationship in order to facilitate the receipt of these supplies were established,



and a new partnership was successfully nurtured. It is clear at the conclusion of our visit that there is much Meaningfulworld can offer in terms of support as these children continue to adjust. The team has begun to coordinate plans to return to Armenia in October 2014 to continue to work with the children, specifically designing more in-depth training for the teachers and educators. In the interim, the team will continue to facilitate the distribution of the most high priority tools, as identified by Director Barseghyan, and welcomes physical and financial donations toward this endeavor. Inquiries regarding continued outreach with Syrian refugees may be directed to Katherine Kaze at kkaze711@gmail.com.

ATOP Meaningfulworld began work in Armenia in 1989 immediately after the earthquake bringing mind-body-eco awareness, mindfulness, meditation, energy balancing, peace building, conflict transformation, leadership, and restorative justice.

Founded in 1990, the Association for Trauma Outreach & Prevention (ATOP) Meaningfulworld, charitable organization affiliated with the United Nations Dept of Public Information, has achieved international recognition as a leader in training humanitarian outreach professionals as well as responding to two decades of global and local disasters. ATOP is committed to health and global education promoting state-of-the-art scientific theory, peace, forgiveness, consciousness research, internship, and the development of technical skills to train mental health professionals, teachers, psychologists, art therapists, nutritionists, alternative medicine practitioners, clergy, nurses, mediators, interfaith ministers, and lay persons committed to service the self and humanity. Meaningfulworld Humanitarian Outreach Program teams have helped rehabilitate survivors from over 45 calamities, making a daily difference in people's lives helping to transform tragedy and trauma into healing and meaning-making through post trauma growth, resilience, emotional intelligence, mind-body-eco-spirit health, visionary leadership, empowerment and artful collaboration through a new world view.

Our Motto: When one helps another BOTH become stronger