

PROJECT HOPE PROVIDES HEALTH CARE FOR REFUGEES

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Photo courtesy of Project HOPE Members of the Project HOPE team in Macedonia talk to some of the Syrian refugees streaming into a transit camp in Gevgelija. Most have left refugee camps in Turkey, trying to reach Germany and other northern European countries to find safety and work.



Photo courtesy of Project HOPE Members of the Project HOPE team speak with a young Syrian mother at the Gevgelija transit center earlier this week. The woman was traveling with her son and a 3-month-old baby, trying to get to Germany where she hopes to find a better life for her sons.

MILLWOOD — Without barbed wire, newspaper coverage or photo opportunities, the tiny state of Macedonia — just north of Greece — is trying to cope with thousands of Syrian refugees seeking asylum in Europe.

And Project HOPE in Millwood is trying to help Macedonia provide needed health care to those migrants.

Founded in 1958, Project HOPE attempts to help medical systems around the world provide better care for people everywhere through disaster relief and continuing training of personnel.

Scott Crawford, director of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief at Project HOPE, said 4,300 migrants entered Macedonia on Tuesday. "It's a pretty big burden."

The groups of men, women and children are part of a horde of refugees from the 4-year-old civil war in Syria, where an estimated quarter million people have died.

The war has created some 4.1 million refugees and displaced another 6.5 million people within the country. In 2012, the country had an estimated population of 22.5 million, according to worldpopulationreview.com.

The flood of refugees attempting to flee to the north is a burden that the tiny, landlocked country of Macedonia, placed between Greece and Serbia, is not in a position to handle, Crawford said.

The Macedonian government has set up two refugee camps, one on its southern border with Greece and one on its northern border, next to Serbia, to try to supply some of the medical needs of the migrants, Crawford said.

The country's budget can only provide about 60 percent of the health services needed in the country, Crawford said. And the added needs of the refugees are seriously overtaxing the system.

Project HOPE has had an office in Macedonia since 1992, Crawford said, and increased its work in the area when war erupted in Kosovo in 1999.

That office has several doctors on staff and a logistics person to help move supplies to the hospitals in Macedonia.

Project HOPE regularly supplies equipment and training that the country can't otherwise afford, he said.

The Millwood nonprofit organization began organizing to increase medical supplies to the country about three weeks ago, he added.

On Monday, a planeload arrived in the country, earmarked for the hospitals serving the refugees and for the transit camps.

The supplies included splints, needles and syringes, stethoscopes, blood collection kits, anti-bacterial solution and other items needed by physicians.

Dr. Dalibor Tasevski, Project HOPE's disaster response coordinator for Central and Eastern Europe, reported that the refugees suffer from simple exhaustion, dehydration, and injuries sustained during their travels — like broken or fractured bones. Some face complications from existing medical conditions, exacerbated by stress, poor nutrition and exposure.

Crawford said Project HOPE is also sending volunteer medical personnel to Macedonia to help spell the local doctors handling the flood of refugees, along with translators to help with the language barriers.

However, he added, many of the refugees do speak English.

“These are not your typical refugees,” Crawford said.

Most have left refugee camps in Turkey, he said, due to the frustration of being unable to get jobs and work. Many are educated or are students, and have special skills.

“They are not content to just sit in the camps,” Crawford said, and the Turks have made it easy for those who want to leave to get out of their country.

For the most part, he added, they do not want to stay in any of the Balkan countries they are crossing on the way to their goal, Germany and Austria.

Crawford said Macedonians are frustrated that the European Union hasn't offered any financial aid to help with the flood of refugees.

The majority of aid is coming from Americans who are supporting Project HOPE's efforts, Crawford said, along with medical and pharmaceutical companies that are providing in-kind donations.

Crawford invited anyone interested in Project HOPE's efforts to go to its website, projecthope.org, for regular updates on the work.

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