

January 2016



# EUROPE REFUGEE AND MIGRANT CRISIS

## CRS REGIONAL RESPONSE



Rahmad and his daughter Rayhon eat lunch in the soup kitchen of Caritas Athens Refugee Centre, in Greece. Photo by Andrew McConnell for CRS

### CONTEXT

The refugee crisis continues to grow, with increasing numbers of refugees fleeing Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries. The number of refugees and migrants in Europe surpassed 1 million as of December 2015, with 70 percent having arrived in Greece. Every day, between 5,000 and 8,000 people embark on the arduous journey from Greece northwards.

With temperatures dropping, the sea route taken by most refugees from Turkey to Greece is increasingly perilous. Yet refugees continue risking their lives to reach safe havens. In 2015, some 2,000 Syrians drowned in the Mediterranean attempting to reach European shores. Others have become victims of trafficking, are subjected to abuse en route, or both. Some spend their life savings or take on massive debt for a new start. Refugee families need food, water, sanitation, protection from the elements and legal advice.

This situation is fluid and changing rapidly, requiring social service agencies to quickly adapt. A recent

example is from November 2015, when—without notice—Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia decided to filter nationalities, allowing only Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans to cross their borders. Other nationalities were stopped at the Idomeni cross-border point, on the Greece-Macedonia border, with no clear option.

Few refugees and migrants have gone back to Athens as they await any update on the border opening. It is unclear if these refugees and migrants will ask for asylum in Greece, as they will likely be denied, or if they will agree to go back to their country of origin, as offered by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). They are likely to wait close to the site in case opportunities arise for them to cross. Recent information also indicates that some refugees may decide to stay in Athens and participate in the newly announced program for asylum in another EU country. However, access to this program remains limited as many of the related “hotspots” exist only on paper at present.

### CRS/CARITAS RESPONSE

CRS is working with more than 10 local partners in Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Albania and Bulgaria to provide food and non-food relief assistance, as well as shelter, sanitation, medical care and translation services to over 51,000 people.

With Caritas and our local partners, we are able to build upon local knowledge, relationships and perspectives, as well as our shared experience in emergency relief, ability to influence decision makers, and complementary technical expertise. With access to a large, committed network of thousands of volunteers from different faiths, we are able to respond quickly, and adapt as needed, to the needs facing our world’s most vulnerable.