

London Donor Conference Pledges Aid Only to Keep Syrian Refugees Out of Europe

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Much has been made of the \$10 billion in aid pledged by world leaders for Syria's refugees at a donor's conference held in London last Thursday. United Nations (UN) Secretary General Ban Ki-moon hailed the conference a "great success," saying, "Never has the international community raised so much money on a single day for a single crisis."

It would be more accurate to say, never have the imperialist powers offered so much cash to keep a crisis they created away from their doors. Syria has been devastated by a civil war instigated by the United States and its allies, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, producing a flood of refugees of historic dimensions.

At least half the Syrian population, 11 million people, are internally displaced, and a further 4.6 million people have fled to neighbouring countries, where they are surviving under the most desperate conditions. The vast majority of these refugees are in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. The purpose of the London meeting was to ensure that the refugees stay there, and do not attempt to travel further west and north, into Europe.

The European Union (EU) pledged \$3.3 billion for this year and intends to "maintain this level of financing" for 2017 and beyond. Britain pledged an extra \$1.7 billion until 2020, Germany committed \$1 billion this year and a further \$1.3 billion by 2018, France said it would give \$1 billion, while the US pledged an extra \$925 million for 2016.

Their motivation was clear, with German Chancellor Angela Merkel telling the conference that the shortfall in food aid in 2015 had prompted the increase in the number of Syrians seeking refuge in Europe.

This money, from the richest countries in the world, is a drop in the ocean. Only \$6 billion of this is for 2016—much less than the \$8.5 billion the UN had sought—with the remainder for 2017 to 2020. This amounts to less than \$400-500 per person per year, assuming the donors honour their pledges. Previous conferences have failed to deliver, leading the World Food programme and other aid agencies to cut back on their already meagre support for Syrian refugees last year, plunging millions into even greater misery and hardship.

Such parsimony contrasts sharply with the amount being spent by Washington and its allies on the war to unseat Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The US Department of Defense alone is spending about \$14 million a day on its operations in Syria and Iraq supposedly combating Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), in addition to the \$187 million it is spending on the Iraq war every day.

Conditions for the refugees in the countries bordering Syria, where they are not legally entitled to work, are dire. Many Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon work as casual labour in informal day jobs for low wages.

Shanta Devarajan, World Bank chief economist for the Middle East and North Africa, said, “Unemployment is high among refugees, especially women, and those who do work often work in the informal sector with no protection.”

She added, “About 92 percent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon have no work contract and more than half of them work on a seasonal, weekly or daily basis at low wages.”

Many children are forced to work because their parents cannot or because they cannot earn enough if they do work.

Turkey, by far the largest and most prosperous of the three countries, has taken in the largest number of Syrian refugees, around 2 million. This along with the economic recession in Europe, its largest export market, has led to unemployment rising to 10 percent, food prices soaring by 12 percent and inflation rising to 9.5 percent.

Lebanon and Jordan, far smaller and more impoverished countries, have taken proportionately more refugees per capita.

Lebanon, with a population of around 3.5 million before the Syrian conflict and youth unemployment of around 35 percent, is hosting around 1.8 million Syrians. This has served to push up rents and decrease wages, leading to an 11 percent decline in per capita income.

Prime Minister Tammam Salam, who came to London at the head of the Lebanese delegation, said that the refugee crisis had cost his country more than \$20 billion. He needed at least \$11 billion—more than the entire \$10 billion pledged over several years at the London conference—to cope with the crisis.

Jordan’s population is now around 8 million, following an influx of about 1.6 million Syrians, of whom only about 680,000 are registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The World Bank estimates that this is costing Jordan over \$2.5 billion a year.

All three countries are now closing their borders to refugees, leaving desperate Syrians stranded. Jordanian officials have said that they will not admit any more refugees without additional aid.

The donors are also making the aid dependent upon the three countries opening up their job markets to refugees to provide a million new jobs.

While Lebanon reluctantly agreed to do so, it refused to grant citizenship, residency rights or legalise their status in Lebanon. Jordan was similarly reluctant, citing the lack of opportunities for its own citizens. In the event, it agreed to measures aimed at creating 200,000 jobs, a further five development zones to be set up around the country, the formalisation of Syrian-owned businesses and the lifting of restrictions on commercial activities within the refugee camps.

It is far from clear that formal employment, should it be available, will provide the refugees with higher wages, while in Turkey, which has agreed to increase the number of work

permits, employers have said that the additional cost of national insurance contributions will lead to workers being fired.

British Prime Minister David Cameron, who chaired the conference along with leaders of Germany, Kuwait, Norway and the UN, said that the neighbouring countries had made a “courageous commitment” to open their economies to provide more jobs, “helped” by \$40 billion of loans and the opening of European markets that would create one million new jobs in the region.

This was a reference to visits by the World Bank, the Islamic Development Bank and the UN to Jordan and Lebanon last week to broach the possibility of “development loans” to shore up their debt-laden economies, something that Jordan rejected.

Imad Fakhoury, the Jordanian planning minister, said that while Jordan welcomed potential offers of concessionary financing, including for development programs that the country had to postpone after the Syria crisis began in 2011, Jordan expects grants—not loans—to address the needs of refugees and of host communities in Jordan that had to absorb large numbers of displaced Syrians.

The London conference, attended by politicians and the aid industry, was a cheap and cynical attempt to ensure that the refugees stay where they are and do not attempt to reach Europe, and is recognised as such.

Doctors Without Borders refused to attend the conference. Vickie Hawkins, the NGO’s UK executive director, said, “We object to the policy of containment that is an undercurrent to this conference.” She continued, “The conference is sending a clear message: don’t come to Europe.”

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