

Subj: **News Article from Stephen Althouse (from Penn. team)**
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 From: scott.mccracken@iteams.org
 To: scott.mccracken@iteams.org
 CC: Macnmony@aol.com, sjbilder@epud.net, donsir0660@hotmail.com, loveforgreece@yahoo.gr,
emma.skjonsby@iteams.org, llir.Cami@iteams.org, Jennifer.Roemhildt@iteams.org,
Jill.Grage@iteams.org, Jim.Skaife@iteams.org, Nader.Mohajer@iteams.org,
Nikos.Stefanidis@iteams.org, ignatiou@otenet.gr, pearsos@iteams.org,
Susie.Lauber@iteams.org, tatianagreek@yandex.ru, tim.sirinides@iteams.org,
Tom.Albinson@iteams.org

Team,
FYI...

This is a 2-part article from one of the Penn. Team members. It is MOSTLY (but not entirely) correct. For example, I am not from Jacksonville, Florida. He is the editor of The Allentown Times, which you can find on the internet at:
<http://www.pennlive.com/allentowntimes/>

Athens: Escape to captivity in the cradle of civilization
PART ONE of TWO

Friday, November 11, 2005

By STEPHEN M. ALTHOUSE The Allentown Times

ATHENS, Greece -- Sometimes I think about what constitutes a meaningful life. Most days I still haven't the foggiest idea. In a world where people are often statistics and a collection of nerve impulses, this existential question can haunt anyone of us who at one time or another sincerely contemplates whether their life is mostly a function.

Compelled to embark upon a journey of desperation, he probably didn't have time for the introspection. Every night for years now the 32-year-old sleeps in a squalid apartment in this urban jungle where philosophers once spoke and disciples once preached. Azad is among the fortunate: Most of his friends in this daunting maze of 5 million rest their heads in makeshift tents under bridges or in parks that outline the narrow streets that are a challenge for any pedestrian to master. For whatever reason, Azad seems at peace with his lot in life, often wearing a smile you could read by.

Every Tuesday and Thursday around noon he makes his way to the Athens Refugee Center in a part of the city where junkies snort their dreams through straws, sometimes in plain view of the good people of the world. Up the squalid steps to the ARC he marches, like he once did when he was a soldier in the Kurdish Army in Northern Iraq. It's been four years now since Azad left his homeland and it was a wise move for someone with an inclination toward breathing. The Butcher of Baghdad, otherwise known as Saddam Hussein, made Azad's life very much a life-and-death issue. Saddam, of course, has destroyed thousands with his lies and now himself is about to be destroyed by the truth. That does Azad little good now as he languidly passes a few hours twice a week sipping the sweetest tea you'll ever taste and playing backgammon in the sanctuary of the ARC, a haven for some of the thousands of refugees that mill about this sprawling mass of humanity.

For 27 days beginning Sept. 11, two groups of 10 from Cedar Crest and Bethel Fellowship churches went to Athens, Greece to perform missionary work and deliver humanitarian aid to asylum-seekers and migrants from the Middle East and Africa. I was one of them.

Few in America know or care about what happens outside this country, save for a tsunami or earthquake. In the Middle East and Africa there are tens of thousands of people fleeing persecution and poverty each year. Most if not all are treated like criminals simply because they hope to obtain a sliver of what many of us have in abundance.

"Thousands of people from Albania, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and elsewhere come to Greece seeking refuge," said Olga Demetriou, a researcher for

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Amnesty International in Greece.

Athens is a magnet for refugees coming from the east and south. It's their first stop on the refugee highway into Europe, where many believe a better life awaits them.

If they only knew the truth, they may stay put. In 2004, for example, only three of 1,000 asylum-seekers in Greece on average were granted refugee protection. Through October of this year some 683 Iraqis have applied for asylum in Greece according to the United Nation's High Commissioner for Refugees. Not a single one has received it. The European Union officially tolerates the refugees. Unofficially it's a much different story.

For all but a few of the asylum-seekers, their waves of dreams are shattered on the rocks of reality. There are, in fact, very few opportunities that await refugees in any European country. Their very lives often dangle like chimes in the wind. While I was in Greece, news came that six would-be African immigrants were killed by Spanish soldiers patrolling the Gourougou forest of dense pines on a hill between the border between Morocco and Melilla. Officially, the soldiers responded in self-defense, as nearly 1,000 Africans seeking to escape poverty tried to cross over into the tiny Spanish enclave, which is separated from Morocco by two razor wire fences. The previous week in Ceuta, a rush resulted in five would-be immigrants being shot and killed.

People like Azad, therefore, are lucky, in a perverted sense of the word.

The Greek government is less inclined to have their soldiers shoot first and ask questions later than other European countries. Still, according to human rights watchdog Amnesty International, Greece treats the refugees like criminals, often detaining them in grim prison-like establishments in remote locations while their applications for asylum churn on aimlessly before invariably being rejected.

It was at the ARC where Mark Benjamin, of Lower Macungie Township, got to know Azad. One day the former Kurdish soldier offered the 40-year-old former U. S. Marine a seat while playing backgammon. Their bond was immediate. "You talk about color in a story," Benjamin tells me during an interview about Azad. "I think what really draws me so much to him is that there is a lot of similarity with his background and my background."

Both he and Benjamin were soldiers. Both are hard of hearing in one ear because of years of firing weapons. Azad was a soldier during the first Gulf War. Benjamin never served in Iraq, but his unit was on deck.

"We had our bags packed, our goodbyes said and we were ready to go and then we were told to standby and put on hold," Benjamin tells me.

Before Azad wound up an impoverished refugee in Greece, he seemingly lived a good life.

"Azad came from a fairly decent family who had money, who had a nice house and it was taken from him by Saddam's regime," Benjamin noted.

The family consisted of a mother, father, sister and brother. Besides being a Kurdish soldier, he also served for two years as a security expert for the Kurdish president, which required him to secure locations before the president and any dignitaries would arrive to conduct discussions. He had material possessions, the potential of starting his own family and the makings of a discernable legacy.

But it all evaporated.

"He didn't agree with the Saddam regime, obviously since he was a Kurdish soldier, but he also didn't agree with the different political parties that were amongst the Kurds," Benjamin said. "He didn't believe in what they were trying to force the people to do."

Ranging anywhere from 25 to 27 million people, the Kurds comprise one of the largest ethnic groups in the world without a separate state. For over a century, many Kurds have campaigned and fought for the right to self-determination in an autonomous homeland known as "Kurdistan." The Iraqi government under Hussein actively opposed the possibility of a Kurdish state, knowing that the development would require him to relinquish parts of his imperial nation.

According to Azad, his views became too much for even his family to bear. "They thought his ideas and his freedom of wanting to express how he thought was admirable, but it caused problems so they pretty much, in a gentle way, told him that he might want to move on," Benjamin tells me. Azad fled the country and went to Iran before traveling west to Syria before eventually sneaking into Turkey. After a period of time unknown to anyone but him, Azad went aboard a boat that set sail for Greece. "He had legal papers to be in Syria, but from there he actually had to pay for a smuggler to get him into Turkey and out," Benjamin said. The cost for the smuggler was \$3,000. The cost of his tattered dreams is undoubtedly much higher.

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Don't give us your tired, your poor

Officially there is little hope for those seeking asylum throughout Europe

PART TWO OF TWO

Friday, November 25, 2005

By STEPHEN M. ALTHOUSEThe Allentown Times

ATHENS, Greece - You get the sense that knows the world is a big, bad and ugly place and decided that he'd take it on the way a little boy takes on a demon.

On this Thursday afternoon his clinic looks like Penn Square at five o'clock as a slew of patients inhabit nearly every crevice of space in the cramped facility. My interpreter and I make our way to his Spartan-like office, above the squeal of crying babies and youngsters, to conduct an interview about what exactly transpires at this place.

The clinic, located two blocks from the Athens Refugee Center, is a magnet for refugees who need medical attention but are devoid of funds to pay for it. Thanks to a slew of private donations, the clinic is able to provide the essential amenities of treatment, although is first to admit it's just that: the basics. These people need a lot more than basics. Six days a week, for the last 10 years, he sees at least 25 to 30 refugees a day, most hailing from the African nations of Somalia and Sudan and many with serious medical problems.

"The biggest health issue, for the Africans, is AIDS," he says through the interpreter. The situation for many of them is indeed dire. Their medical conditions range from bad to worse and their status as asylum-seekers only adds to the desperation.

"If they have severe medical issues, or need attention, the hospital will see them," he says, but only in cases where life-and-death is involved.

"The hospital will accept them if they have a pink card," he says. The pink card designation denotes that they are officially seeking asylum. The Greek government, he says, issues about 17 to 18,000 of these cards a year. "If they don't have the pink card, they have major problems."

Even the most vulnerable are not immune from falling through the bureaucratic cracks. Often children of the refugees receive only a minute helping of the medical attention they need. Still there is good news amid the din of hopelessness. On our final full day in Athens, three children from Iraq were actually transferred to Greece to receive medical treatment under a plan undertaken by philanthropic groups and two doctors. Greek Health Minister Nikitas Kaklamanis approved the free medical treatment and hospitalization.

If that is encouraging, then my interview with the man who helps run the ARC proves enlightening.

On the fifth day of our trip, I thought Scott McCracken was cracked, as in crazy. My 35th birthday was marked by a number called "The Birthday Song," which suffice it to say, relays a morbid message about being one day closer to death. What was really unnerving about the "song," besides its subject matter, is the fact that McCracken sang it -- or rather shouted it like a dog in heat -- at the top of his lungs, on a crowded downtown street in the

city's modest financial district. Shop owners emerged from their businesses, wondering which wing nut had escaped from the asylum, while pedestrians gazed on in silent horror.

McCracken's voice is quaint and reassuring during our interview, however. Originally from Jacksonville, Fla., he is a founder of Helping Hands Ministry, which since 1993, has attempted to meet the needs of the refugees by providing free clothing and showers, to offering language and computer classes.

What the Greek government says and actually does in relation to the refugees are two different matters.

"The official stance is that everybody has the right to apply for asylum, period." McCracken says. "What a lot of the human rights organizations, like Amnesty International, have also determined from their research is that in spite of the fact that refugees have been given the right to apply for asylum, many of them are being kicked out of the country without following through on the application procedure."

For those officially under consideration for asylum, two important factors have to be considered.

"Number one, it takes two to four years to get an answer to the application," McCracken notes. Meanwhile there is no assistance available to them, and no legal means of obtaining employment, rendering it nearly impossible to gain even the most basic of housing.

After years of waiting for a response, McCracken says, most never receive the answer they want.

"Two years ago, 10 percent received a positive answer. Last year .3 percent received a positive answer," McCracken says. Unofficially, McCracken reasons, the numbers plainly indicate the government will make it as hard as possible to keep the refugees in, while officially satisfying The European Union's policy to allow everyone the right to apply.

"Objectively looking at it, Greece is the worst country in the EU in terms of the bureaucratic procedures and lack of assistance for those applying," McCracken says. Even though refugees naively view Greece as a gateway to the West geographically and its inclusion in the EU, they quickly become disillusioned and realize they have no legitimate hope of staying in the country.

"The problem is once they're here, once they're processed, once they're fingerprinted, that information goes out to the rest of the European Union," McCracken says. "So even though many leave Greece to look for asylum elsewhere to a more generous or liberal country, once they find out their fingerprints have been taken here, they are sent back to Greece."

England, France, Germany, Sweden and Italy are deporting thousands every year back to Greece, only making the situation more precarious.

That backdrop is the reason for organizations such as Helping Hands. The non-profit Greek-registered organization attempts to meet the physical and social needs of the refugee and ethnic minority groups in greater Athens. Helping Hands has hosted as many as 3,000 refugees a week during its busiest times, McCracken notes, which are in the winter months. In the last few years the organization has seen a dramatic increase in the number of homeless women and children. It is not uncommon to see mothers with newborn babies who are forced to live in parks and abandoned buildings.

"We measure our success in terms of our obedience," McCracken says philosophically. "Jesus himself said you'll always have the poor with you. So if our goal is to eradicate poverty or to solve all the problems of the refugees, then we will always be failing and we will always be frustrated...It's a little different measure than how the world measures it."

Contributions can be made to Amnesty International at www.amnesty.org. The Helping Hands Ministry can be reached by mail at P.O. Box 34210, 100 29 Athens, Greece, in care of director Nikos Stefanidis.

Scott & Vicki McCracken
Panagiotou 3 Papagou
15669 Athens/GREECE

(30) 210-65-28-191

E-mail: scott.mccracken@iteams.org

Web pages:

www.ITRefMin.org (click "Teams", then click "Athens")

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