

Ansamed

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Syria: R&RS, a new NGO devoted to winning the peace

Soon to open its first center, for young refugees in Lebanon

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(ANSAMed) - BEIRUT, FEBRUARY 5 - Based in Brussels and with an affiliate in Beirut, the multi-national, multi-faith members of the fledgling organization Relief & Reconciliation for Syria (R&RS) are devoting themselves to the task of winning the peace.

After almost two years of civil war, winning the peace in Syria will take more than humanitarian aid: there must also be reconciliation to prevent the country from spiraling into revenge and sectarian violence long after hostilities are officially over.

R&RS is made up of Arab and European experts in peace-building, interfaith dialogue, and postwar intervention, of lawyers and psychologists, scholars, diplomats and intellectuals who are familiar with Syria. President Friedrich Bokern has direct experience in reconciliation efforts in the Balkans in the second half of the 1990s. "Already back then, we realized the contradictions inherent in interventions that are based solely on the humanitarian or solely on the peace-building approach," Bokern told ANSAMed in an interview. "We must intervene in Syria now. Not only by bringing emergency humanitarian aid, but also by working to support internal reconciliation." The bloodiest sectarian massacres so far have taken place in the central Syrian area around the cities of Hama and Homs: isolated by a desert to the east and mountains to the west, it is dotted with Alawite, Sunni, Christian and Ismaili communities.

Lebanon's Akkar district and Bekaa Valley lie just a few kilometers away from Homs, and this is where the R&RS team wants to open its first Peace Center. "First of all it will be a safe place, a haven for young people and families. There will be not only doctors but also psychologists, lawyers and artists to help support the victims of violence on many levels," Bokern explained. "This is a long-term project. As soon as conditions allow, we will go operate on Syrian territory. Meanwhile, we'll begin in Lebanon." Lebanon, pop. less than 4 million, already hosts 220,000 Syrian refugees. The first R&RS Peace Center will host about 200 young refugees from Syria in Lebanon, and will cost an estimated 300,000 euros for the whole of 2013. Right now it has no national or institutional funding, and the group is fundraising via its website: www.reliefandreconciliation.org. "Our approach focuses on local communities and their needs first of all," said Bokern. "For example, being in Lebanon, we can't exclude Lebanese families who are sharing the space with Syrians. Once we get to Syria we will try to bring together young men and women from the various communities in conflict.

They are the future of Syria, and we must focus on them." As far as the issue neutrality, which arises whenever Western organizations try to intervene in Syria, Bokern said: "It's a very sensitive issue. But because we don't work exclusively in the humanitarian sector, we consider the conflict itself to be the object of our intervention. If we really want to work for reconciliation, we must look at the causes of the conflict and its consequences." (ANSAMed).

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