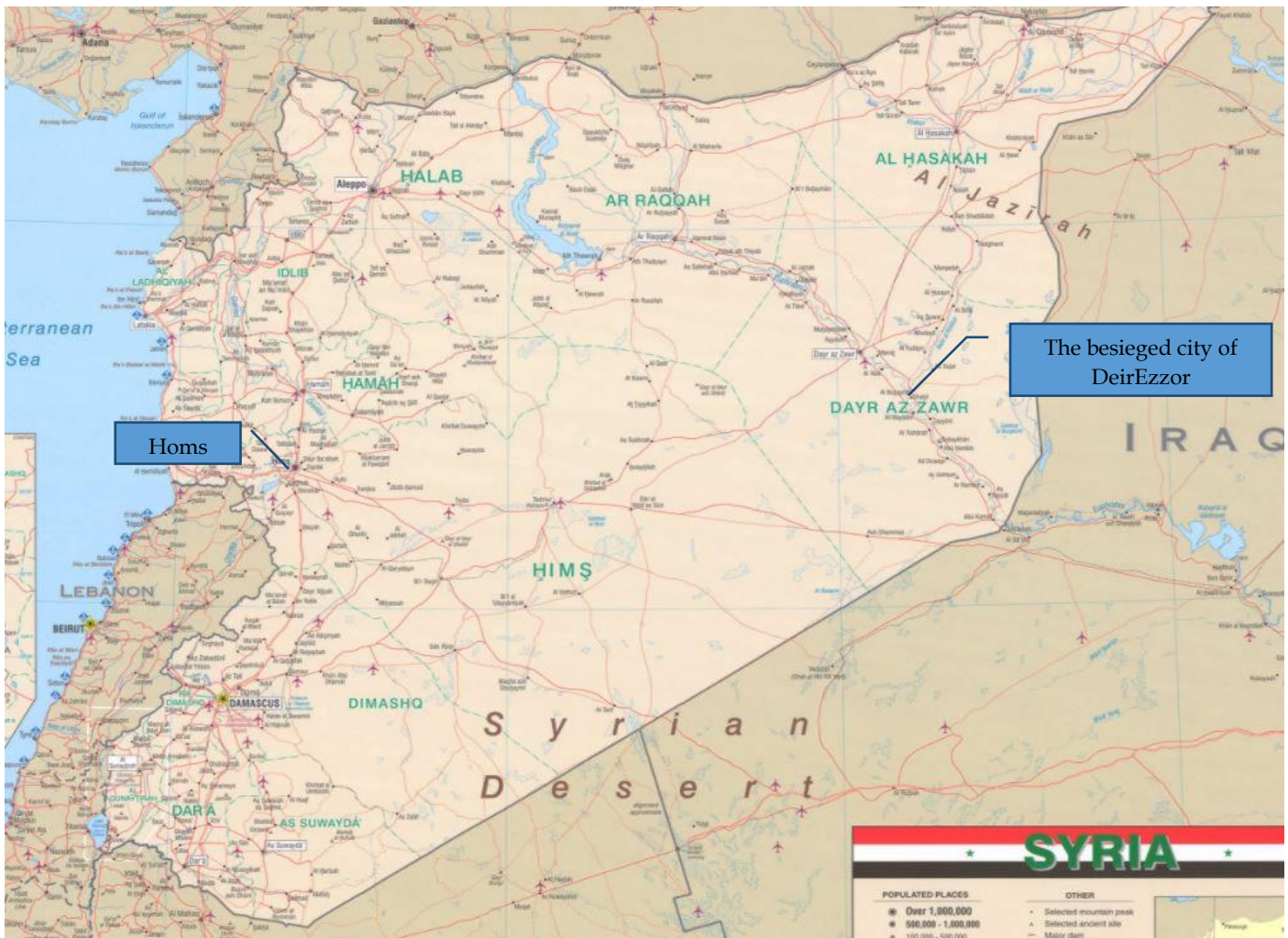


FIRST HUMANITARIAN AID CONVOY TO DEIR AZZOR - SYRIA - SINCE THREE YEARS SIEGE

The monastery of Mar Yakub, Syria, was the first to deliver humanitarian aid on the 7th of September 2017 to the city of Deir ez-Zor since the siege by ISIS that started in 2014. Deir ez-Zor is the largest city in eastern Syria and the seventh largest in the country, it is located 450 km to the northeast of the capital Damascus on the banks of the Euphrates River. For the last three years the city has been surrounded by terrorist forces and was thus locked out from the outside world. A lot of people starved to death. Others survived on airdroppings from the Red Crescent and by drinking bad water, purifying it with chlorine. The Syrian army opened a road through the desert to Deir ez-Zor on September 7th. That same day the monastery of Mar Yakub sent 5 cars with humanitarian aid to the suffering population.



In this report we will present to you the humanitarian expedition in two parts. First of all we will go through the chronology of events. We will start the chronology by narrating how we travelled through the middle of nowhere, an abandoned desert road that ISIS controlled for the last 4 years until the army recovered it just 5 days earlier - then we will expound how the actual distribution of humanitarian aid took place; the second part will deal with stories of the people we met at Deir ez-Zor and how they survived this siege.

CHRONOLY OF EVENTS

September 6th

A. Road to Deir ez-Zor

At 7.20 AM we left Homs (see map above) with 2 ambulances, one truck with 5 tons of potatoes and about 4000 eggs, one truck of medical supplies, another truck filled with powdered milk, oatmeal, pacifiers and baby bottles, a lorry with 6000 bottles of water and one bus with 2 doctors to perform medical aid and about 10 young people to assure the distribution.



Around 10.30 AM we arrived at a checkpoint on the road to Raqqa. There we were stopped. The army told us that we couldn't continue until the mines were cleared from the entry road into Deir ez-Zor. We waited there until they gave us the OK to go at 4.30 PM. After that, about 100km in the journey, our truck transporting the potatoes and eggs broke down and needed repairs.



Already before the war people didn't like to venture on the road from Homs to Deir ez-Zor. It's a lonely asphalted path with no gas stations. If your car breaks down you have to get a mechanic from the closest city. Luckily our car transporting eggs and potatoes was quickly repaired and was able to arrive at Deir ez-Zor one day later.



While driving we noticed a corpse of an ISIS fighter by the side of the road and we also saw some paintings of ISIS logo's as we passed through.



At about 8 o'clock in the evening we stopped at an army checkpoint where we were able to fill gas. After that the road went from bad to worse; every 200m or so the road was cracked open or had a pit with a diameter of at least 1.5m. We were thus zigzagging in the abandoned desert until suddenly: "bam" ... a flat tire. The truck transporting the powdered milk and the oatmeal hit a large rock that was clumsily resting on the road. The entire convoy stopped, multiple keys were brought in, different people tried to unloose the wheel ... it was no use - it was impossible to take off the tire. About 12 people surrounded the truck in the darkness of the desert. Luckily we had a full

moon. We then decided to leave the truck, empty its supplies and pack them in the two ambulances so as not to waste too much time. The driver would stay at the closest army checkpoint.



The whole operation took about one hour. At 10.00 PM we were ready to go again. A little later the people guiding us warned us saying that we were to approach a very bad dirt road entering into Deir ez-Zor. Upon hearing this we were forced to leave the big lorry with water bottles fearing that it would get stuck in the sand. Of the entire convoy only 2 ambulances and the little bus transporting the young volunteers remained. We then ventured into the desert road. We were praying to the Virgin Mary to guide us; going up and down little hills - giving a little gas and then suddenly blasting down the pedal - trying to stay in the tracks of the army jeep going before us. Luckily only one ambulance got stuck - a jeep had to drive back to pull it out. Finally we arrived at a more or less descent and hardened desert road where we had to drive between markings of empty tank shells. Crossing the markings meant going into an unsafe zone filled with mines.





The Desert Road: This picture is from our way back - in the pitch darkness it was hard to take clear pictures

B. Arrival at Deir ez-Zor

At 1.00 AM we finally entered Deir ez-Zor. We were the first civilians entering the city in three years. We were guided through little streets to the general hospital. There we met the director of the hospital who opened for us a corridor of his hospital where we could spend the night. He told us that he hadn't left Deir ez-Zor since 6 years and that he and a couple of other doctors - because the great majority fled - were doing what they could to help the local population. The hospital was surrounded by ISIS forces but remained a free area during the war. They lack everything. Due to a shortage of medicine and doctors they were often forced to amputate. The doctor also explained that they felt quite abandoned by the outside world but immediately expressed his joy that we had arrived. We thus spent the night there and were immediately faced with the main issue the Deir ez-Zorians have to deal with: the shortage of water. Only every couple of days water is brought through the pipe line system. The water is not clean - people often "purify" it with chlorine. Almost the entire population has kidney stones due the dirty water. Fetching water from the Euphrates is also regarded as "mission impossible": ISIS terrorists snipe women and children who dare to venture to the river bank.

September 7th - Distribution

At 10.30AM we started the distribution of medical supplies at the **general hospital**. The doctors and nurses went through the boxes to sort out the bandages from the IV-bags, the fever pills from the anti-lice medicine





After a half hour we went to the **clinic of Khaled Ben Walid** in the Qussur area, which used to be very rich before the war. Deir ez-Zor is one of the richest cities of Syria due to its great resources of gas and oil – now every family has been reduced to poverty and starvation. There we distributed for every family powdered milk, oatmeal, pacifiers and a baby bottle. Unfortunately some thugs arrived at the distribution point causing chaos and punching each other. The population would always tell us: “please excuse the people, they are just very hungry”.



We have no pictures of the actual distribution. These one were taking before at the same site.

Around 11.30 AM we went to the *Thawra* clinic in the *Thawra* neighborhood. The population there told us that the “safe area” where they live numbers about 70 000 people and consists of two great neighborhoods. “Safe area” is a euphemism because they are bombed daily by the terrorists and have to watch out from snipers. They never know coming out of their houses if they will come back in the evening.



The Thawra clinic

At noon we started our distribution at the Thawra clinic, fraught with difficulties. The people were so hungry and eager to receive powdered milk that they started a small riot. The sign in and distribution system was overrun and we had to relocate because of safety concerns. One team was writing down the names of the people while the others were distributing the supplies from the back door of the ambulance. This went well as long as it were women and children but when men joined the crowd it got too rowdy. We were thus forced to relocate behind a police barrier and ask the soldiers there if they would help us to separate the crowd and form lines.

On the two pictures below you can see that all the people had to first write down their names. Only then, after having giving a valid ID and a valid age of their children could they proceed to receive powdered milk, oatmeal, a pacifier and a baby bottle.

Further on the pictures show the actual distribution and the crowd that started to push in such a manner that we had to pause the distribution.





Around 12.30 we were informed that the potatoes and the eggs had arrived. But when the crowd saw the truck they started to climb into it from all sides. The truck then also rapidly joined our ambulance at the entry point of the army base checkpoint. There we gave it another attempt and the distribution restarted. But now again a riot broke out. Finally going a little further one inside the military base we were able to complete the distribution in peace. These poor people were so hungry that they were close to despair.

Photos of the distribution; now a bag of potatoes and eggs are added to the milk products.





On the following pictures you can see the army trying to calm down the people and creating a barrier so that they can form lines:



Thereupon we went a little further to finish the distribution inside the base. In the pictures you can see the truck of eggs and potatoes.





At 4.00 PM we finished the distribution. The population was delighted to have seen people coming from outside. And as we were leaving other trucks were coming to help to bring further help to the starving and yet so kind and so courageous Deir ez-Zorians.

STORIES OF PEOPLE



A girl walks past a barricade as citizens line up for food and medical supply distribution, Sept 7, 2017 – Thawra neighborhood, Deiraz-Zor, east Syria.

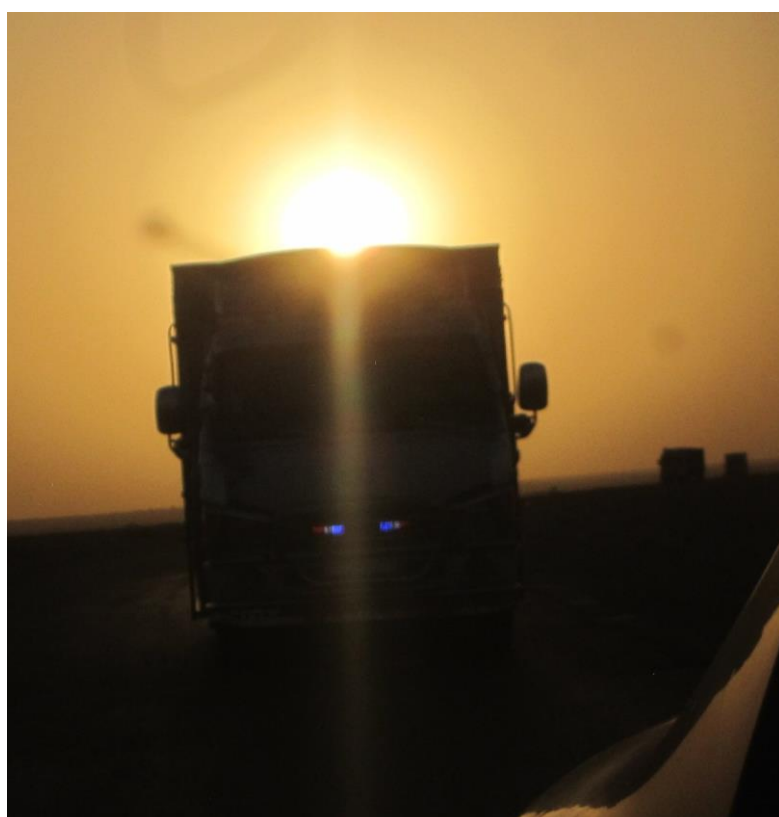
Their story is one of incredible courage, and faith in God, and the triumph of the human spirit. By Brother David Johnson, Monastery of Mar Yakub, humanitarian aid.

For one day, we witnessed something unimaginable to us: the tears of suffering and cries of joy in the beloved city of Deir ez-Zor, the heart of ISIS-dominated territory of East Syria. And for one day, they

witnessed something unimaginable to them: the breaking of their 3 year siege. The siege has ravaged every family in Deir ez-Zor.

Any historian will tell you, sieges can get ugly. 2000 years ago the Roman siege of Jerusalem reduced to rubble that city that David called: "The splendor of perfection, the joy of all the earth, mount Zion, the city of the great king," (Ps 48:2). But according to eye-witness of the siege of Jerusalem, Jewish historian Josephus the Romans crucified 500 men a day, while many thousands died of starvation, women became cannibals of children, the remaining "survivors" were burned alive: 1.2 million people. The siege of Deir ez-Zor in modern Syria is a tragedy of equally epic proportions, one of the great crimes of our times. It has reduced the city of 1.5 million, one of the richest in Syria with its families of elite oil barons, to murdered corpses, starving refugees and penniless scavengers wandering the streets.

For three years, these 100,000 ordinary Syrians have endured 3 waves of terrorist sieges. The hospital director explained to our humanitarian aid team the night of Sept 6th 2017: "First the Free Syrian Army, then Al-Nusra, then ISIS blockaded the city and surrounded us. Most people fled the city. We preferred neutrality and staying in the army protected area." "ISIS is 100 meters from my office wall. And because of them, my son has lost all faith in God." He served us coffee, while he prepared our rooms. "I have faith" then he joked, "But we are so used to the sound of gunfire at night we can't sleep without it. If their happens to be a night *without* shooting then we play a tape recording of gunfire just to get some sleep!"



On the evening of Sept 6, 2017, trucks from the Monastery of St James, Qara - Mother FadiaLaham - Humanitarian Aid team from Aleppo was the **first humanitarian aid convoy to break the 3-year-long siege**. Bringing in several tons of potatoes, eggs, water, powdered milk, and medical supplies.



“I haven’t seen tissue paper in years!”

The first citizens of Deir ez-Zor to tell us their story were Anis and Anis, 2 friends of 26 and 19 years. The younger Anis was delighted to have a Kleenex tissue paper to wipe his nose. And with a cigarette in his hand he said: “You are the first people from outside Deir ez-Zor we have seen in 3 years. This city was once the richest area in Syria. But the siege put us back to living like people in the 1st century. Going out to cut down tree branches to cook food, as people of long ago!”

The older Anis explained how things have been since the siege began: “We have had nothing coming in or out over the last 2 years and 9 months. Imagine: no meat, nor vegetables, no flour, no cooked food or clean water”. About 80% of Deir ez-Zor’s 1.5 million have people fled: “We are the 100,000 citizens who remained,” he said, “And we survive from food supplies of the Red Cross, sent down by parachute.”

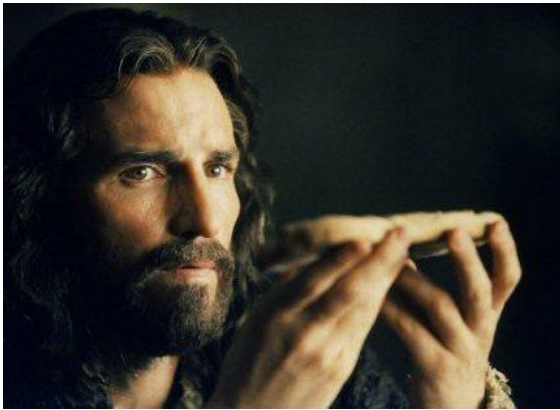


Muhannad, left and youth of Qusur neighborhood with Brother David

“Thanks for the sandwich, I haven’t eaten bread in 3 years!”

Said Muhannad, a very thin, but joyful high school student – as he slowly and carefully ate a chickensandwich. “Wow with tomatoes and cucumber”, all items he said, “These are so delicious, I forgot what they taste like”.Ironically, he’s the one wearing the “Hungry Moose” shirt above, left. So I asked him: “Are you a hungry moose?” “Well, do you know what it’s like to be hungry?” He asked me. “Yes, and I know what it’s like to fast... for religious reasons” I said. “But do you know what it’s like to be really hungry?” he said. “Do you know what it is like to watch your family starve?” I just looked and wondered at his beautiful smile.

Muhannad is so kind, he just wanted to be my friend. “When death and destruction all around, it is faith in God’s grace that sustains us”. Proudly he escorted me into his dad’s barber shop and gave me cold water, a very precious commodity, and he wanted to throw in a shave but there was no time – though it’s a relatively painless procedure. Muhannad has kept his spirits up by studying, he just succeeded on his Baccalaureate and has chosen to study engineering at the University.



“I am the BREAD OF LIFE, that came down from heaven” – our Lord Jesus

Bread is the heart and soul of Middle Eastern cuisine, served at every meal. Yet in DeirZor, they told us: “How can we eat bread? The line for bread is so long, you have to wait 2 days, and sleep at the bakery just to get a little.”



“You see that hole in the wall? That’s where they bombed us last night”

Meet Majed, 24 (left, Brother John, right). Majed is an intelligent and inquisitive student volunteer at the Thawra medical clinic. “What work do you do in the Monastery?” he asked. “Bro John takes care of trees. And I’m a shepherd”, I said.“Sheep are great,” said Majed, “I just graduated from the college of veterinary

medicine.” “What? There is university life in DeirZor? “ “Yes, after 3 years of siege, there are only 17 students left. But we continued to study at the university anyways, and I recently graduated”.

The river Euphrates goes through the center of town, but was guarded by terrorists such that the people could not make use of it for irrigation nor drinking – on pain of death.



One of the medical clinic staff, Samira, explained to us: “No one can drink from the river because it’s impure and because of ISIS snipers. So there is no good water to drink. The water we do drink is pumped from underground, coming about once a week.” She added, “Because of the bad water now everyone in Deir ez-Zor has kidney stones, the mineral content of the water is so high.”

It has been so hard to live without decent food and water: “About a year ago some of the men, tried to break the siege by leaving the city to get food,” another volunteer explained, “But their heads were cut off by ISIS terrorists.”



The bombing of the medical clinic took place the night before we came. On top of the food shortage is the constant barrage of bombings. “Last night our medical clinic was bombed by ISIS” they said to me, “Look! There is the whole in the wall from their rocket! Thank God no one was killed.”

Majed's friend Khaled explained in a poetic image what it was like to survive from food sent by parachute: "Just as *saidna Isa* (Jesus) sent down *maida* (a table of food) from heaven onto his disciples in the holy Quran, so we receive the nourishment from heaven sent down to us in parachutes of the Red Cross/Crescent".



"Hi, I'm Shady Tuma," a young hipster of about 30 years old, came up to us and proudly said, "I am the only Christian who has stayed in Deir ez-Zor through this siege. After ISIS destroyed our churches my family and all the Christians left. But I love it here, the siege is not so bad" he said, "So, Abuna, when can you come celebrate mass for us?"



View from the window of the General Hospital of DeirazZor, where ISIS-controlled territory is just 100 meters away.

Here are things that the people of Deir ez-Zor still badly need:

1. **Basic medical supplies**
2. **water purification system**
3. **Food that doesn't need cooking**
4. **Powdered milk**
5. **Shoes**
6. **Personal hygiene products**
7. **Baby clothes**
8. **A good friendly handshake and a cup of tea**



With immense gratitude we thank all our benefactors without which this expedition would have been impossible. May God bless you! We now hope to prepare a much larger humanitarian aid operation in the days to come in the city of Deir ez-Zor.