

Press Release 7 October 2014

SYRIA

On the night of 5 October a number of rebels linked to Al-Nusra Jahbat entered the Convent of St. Joseph in Knayeh, near the Turkish border, and kidnapped the Franciscan parish priest Father Hanna Jallouf and also abducted a number of civilians. The Franciscan sisters who were in the convent have taken refuge in local homes in the village.

This Syrian village is the base not only for the Latin Parish (a shelter and a center for young people) but also for the 4 reception centers established by the friars of the Custody of the Holy Land at the beginning of the conflict, for which there are also now fears for their survival.

The announcement came this morning (7 October) from the Custody of the Holy Land in Jerusalem. At the end of the communiqué were the following words: “We are unable to say where Father Hanna and his parishioners are and, at this time, we have no possibility of contact with him or his captors. Let us pray for him and for the other victims of this tragic and senseless war”.

The Custos, Pierbattista Pizzaballa, President of Association pro Terra Sancta, recently traveled to Syria – accompanied by Father Simon Herro, in charge of the St. Paul Region – to see first hand the situation facing the friars and the convents, as the news making its way to Jerusalem was frequently confusing and direct communications were continually disrupted. With several friars there had in fact been no contact for several months due to the lack of electricity.

The most affected areas are in the northwest of the country, in the **Orontes** River Valley where a number of Christian villages are located (Knayeh, Yacoubieh, Jisr, Ghassanieh and Gidaideh) and in **Aleppo**. In Latakia and Damascus, on the other hand, the situation is under better control.

Father Hanna's convent, in **Knayeh**, recently was left with no glass in the windows and with a damaged roof allowing water to penetrate throughout.

Another affected village in the Orontes area is **Ghassanieh** where a year ago Father François Murad, 49 years old, was killed, also by militiamen from Jabhat al-Nusra. The village at one time contained 4,000 inhabitants. Today the houses here, as in the other villages, have been abandoned and are occupied by the advancing rebels, many with their families.

The convent in **Yacoubieh**, only a short distance from the Turkish border, was struck on 20 July by a missile launched from an aircraft. The building suffered severe damage but fortunately there were no deaths and the parish priest Father Dhiya Azziz reported only several head wounds. Here there is another reception center.

In these centers, in the churches and in the clinic the friars are assisting dozens of families, refugees and displaced persons, both Christians and Muslims, providing them basic necessities, care and help in finding a home to live. Their major difficulty is in obtaining medical supplies.

In **Aleppo**, where 4 million people were living before the war, including 200,000 Christians, today there is total chaos and it is hard to find basic goods such as food and heating oil. Many Christians have fled to other countries and only slightly more than a third now remain.

There is often no water in the city for 7-10 days in a row. The 4 wells built by the Franciscans before the outbreak of war are proving to be of vital importance each day for thousands of people. Others are trying to construct new wells, but the cost is very high (around \$25,000).

Electricity cuts at first lasted 6 hours, but now they can be for as long as 12-24 hours. The population, despite the bombardments and constant fear of moving around, continues to go to church.

Supporting the Association pro Terra Sancta means to support the Syrian population and to provide concrete help to all the friars and the religious who are living in Syria. Each contribution is of the utmost importance.

The Association, the nonprofit NGO of the Custody of the Holy Land, is an integral part of the coordination of Catholic humanitarian intervention in these countries and the surrounding region where there are numerous Syrian refugees (Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, Cyprus and Egypt).

In Syria the needs are infinite, the value of the dollar has tripled and the Syrian pound continuously declines in value. Rents for houses are very high, food supplies are in the hands of market monopolies with prices continuing to rise, there is not enough work to go around and the hospitals are poorly equipped.

In the most heavily-bombed areas, in Aleppo and in the 5 villages of the Orontes, the friars are providing food, milk for children and clothing. But especially money -- to pay for medicines and medical operations and for temporary accommodation for those whose houses have been destroyed by missiles, for making rental payments, as well as for paying travel expenses for those seeking to escape.

There are several means of sending your contribution:

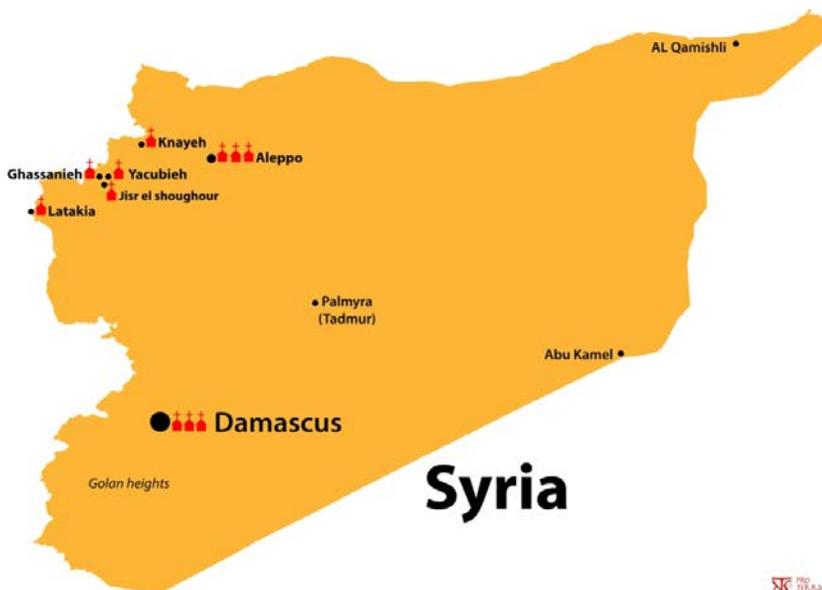
ONLINE (credit card – VISA and MasterCard – or PayPal)

<http://www.proterrasancta.org/en/help-your-donation/>

BANK TRANSFER ATS – IBAN: IT67 W050 18121010 0000 0122691 BIC/Swift Code: CCRTIT2T84A

THE CUSTODY OF THE HOLY LAND IN SYRIA

Since the beginning of the war the friars of the Custody of the Holy Land – who in this country represent the Catholic Church of the Latin rite – have opened their convents and churches to provide accommodation and help meet the basic needs of numerous Christian and Muslim families, who are hanging on thanks to their help. There are at present 14 friars in the country, in *Aleppo, Damascus, Homs and in a number of villages near the Turkish and Lebanese borders*. Their number has recently increased thanks to several youths who have been sent to assist them.



In *Aleppo* is located the Convent of St. Anthony of Padua and the Convent of St. Francis in nearby *Azizieh*. *Damascus/Bab Touma* is home to the Convent of St. Paul and the Chapel of St. Ananias. There are two other active convents in the Syrian capital, the Memorial to St. Paul is in *Tabbaleh* (where his conversion took place) while in nearby *Salhieh* is the Convent of St. Anthony. On the coast at Latakia is the Convent of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In *Knayeh*, close to Turkey, is the Convent of St. Joseph. In *Jisr al-Shughur* is the Convent of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and in *Yacoubieh* the Convent of Our Lady of Fatima. The 4 reception centers that have been set up are in *Knayeh, Yacoubieh, Jisr al-Shughur* and *Jdeideh*. They offer accommodation to around 200 people and each day help to meet the needs of an additional 4,000.