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Solidarity with war refugees

BARRACK CLEAN-UP

November 28th 2016

About one dozen activists from across the globe, alongside Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and Refugee Aid Serbia (RAS), came together to address the issue of scabies and lice in the abandoned storage facilities behind the Belgrade bus and train stations. One group of volunteers steamed and disinfected blankets as people who are squatting in the buildings brought them out. A second group sprayed and disinfected the buildings and the things in them. A third group went into each of the buildings before they were disinfected, and cleaned up all of the garbage. The planning process began before 8:00 and the entire clean-up was finished around 15:30. Despite the threats that we were told beforehand that 2 of the 3 buildings were to be demolished, we went ahead with the work and later found out that the city was bluffing; more attempts from the state to prevent activists and volunteers from assisting refugees in any way at all.

Cleaning the barracks involved sweeping and shovelling all of the garbage that was inside of them. Once volunteers entered a building and began sweeping or picking up litter, or shovelling piles of garbage, people who were squatting in that space immediately joined in to help. Each building has anywhere between 100 – 150 people squatting in it, so the collective cleaning effort was accomplished with incredible teamwork, and across language barriers. MSF supplied cleaning supplies such as shovels, rakes, and brooms, as well as dust masks and gloves. Buildings that have been abandoned for many years become garbage sites, and people treat them as large-scale dumpsters. Refugees and undocumented asylum seekers who are passing through Serbia but are stuck in the country for the time being have had to take shelter in these dilapidated and neglected buildings, which had accumulated years of garbage in them. In addition, there are inadequate garbage facilities in the area, no electricity, and no running water in all of the buildings (save for some broken pipes that continue to drip water in some locations), so the conditions are deplorable and unimaginable. It is hard to survive one day of cleaning these buildings, let alone sleeping in them for months on end. It is no wonder that these conditions make them ripe locations for lice, scabies, and other illnesses. People squatting in these buildings had no access to the resources they needed to clean them adequately, let alone disinfect or steam them. We are quick to sympathize with people who live in slums in Brazil or India, the most well-recorded cases of slum cities, but when slums exist right next to our own homes, people are quick to turn away from them and ignore them.



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The field behind the train station, next to the buildings, has become the only washroom facility that people have. It is covered in feces and the stench of urine is extremely strong. The bus station charges 50 RSD for using their washrooms, which is a price that is quite high for even the local population, and is a barrier for refugees who need to use the facilities – it is the closest facility to them, but completely inaccessible.

During the full-day clean-up, our clothes and shoes were covered in dirt and dust, which puts into perspective the level of unsanitary conditions that refugees in Serbia have to put up with. The state consistently repeats their well-rehearsed sound bite that refugees in Serbia are given all that they need in government-run centres, and that their necessities are met. Who would *choose* to live in those conditions above these so-called centres that meet all of peoples' basic needs is beyond us. The largest building was the last one to be cleaned. The smoke inside of the building was unbearable, which means that it is not firewood that is being burned, but anything that people can get a hold of – scraps, garbage, wood that is soaked in oil from passing trains in the train yard, wet cardboard, furniture pieces, etc. In this final building, we located some of our friends from Afghanistan that were squatting there, and as happy as we were to see them safe and reconnect with them, as well as spend some time chatting with them, we were still heartbroken to see that they were still in Serbia, after all of these months. Borders are spaces of violence that simultaneously keep people trapped in one space, and excluded from another. They cannot enter one space or leave the one they are in; Serbia has become a prison for thousands of refugees, undocumented people, migrants, and asylum seekers.

When everything was completed, the volunteers/activists all had the luxury of going home to enjoy a hot shower, a change of clothes, and a warm apartment. Coming to terms with this is one of the most challenging things; navigating our own privileges is an important thing to keep in mind during this process. Rather than pity or sympathy, refugees in Serbia require direct action, real results, and solidarity at all times. What may be difficult for some people to do for a few hours is other peoples' reality.

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