

Antipodes continue to fall short on aid to Syria

by Jo Spratt

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Syrian internally displaced people walk in the Atme camp, along the Turkish border in the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib, on March 19, 2013. The conflict in Syria between rebel forces and pro-government troops has killed at least 70,000 people, and forced more than one million Syrians to seek refuge abroad. AFP PHOTO/BULENT KILIC (Photo credit should read BULENT KILIC/AFP/Getty Images)

Both Australia and New Zealand are doing abysmally in funding their fair share of the needed funds for Syrians suffering the effects of three years of war, and to support Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey as these countries help millions of Syrians fleeing their homes.

Oxfam's now-annual '**Fairer Deal**' report uses three indicators to assess how well countries are doing in assisting fellow Syrians in their plight: funding allocated to the humanitarian response relative to the country's gross national income, the number of places pledged for Syrian refugees by the end of 2015, and a country's stance on arms and ammunition transfers to Syria. Australia and New Zealand have mixed assessments.

First, funding. Oxfam calculates that the total request for funds amounts to US\$7.7 billion. The international community has provided only 43.6 per cent of this amount. New Zealand contributed a mere 34 per cent of its fair share in 2014. Australia gave less, at 27 per cent. This places both donors down amongst some of the least fair-sharers in the world. What is worse is that for both countries their 2014 contributions are a decrease on what they gave previously. In 2013 Australia gave a commendable **83 per cent**, while New Zealand gave **42 per cent**. (Of note: in 2014 Australia was the country with the **largest decrease** in humanitarian funding overall, since 2013.)

To place these figures in comparison, using the same methodology, Jordan spent US\$522 million in 2014 – a whopping 7,468 per cent of its fair share (if it was treated as a traditional donor). Similarly, Lebanon's expenditure is probably somewhere around 9,477 per cent of its fair share (p. 7). As Jordan's planning

Minister highlighted, the number of Syrian refugees Jordan is supporting is like “the United States absorbing the entire population of Canada” (p. 2). Countries neighbouring Syria are doing far more than their fair share and far more than they can sustainably bear. Donors such as Australia and New Zealand can and should do much more.

Carrying the international community are other Syrian neighbours who are giving much more of their fair share, or close to it, such as the United Arab Emirates at 121 per cent, Saudi Arabia at 98 per cent, Qatar giving 186 per cent and Kuwait a vast 1003 per cent of their fair share. These countries sit alongside other community stand-outs: the United Kingdom (141 per cent), Denmark (163 per cent), Luxembourg (158 per cent) and Norway (212 per cent) (p. 5).

There is a bright side for New Zealand and Australia. Both are doing well on Oxfam’s third indicator: countries’ policy and practice on arms transfers to Syria. Australia states that arms transfers to Syria would be considered illegal. New Zealand states that stringent controls govern transfers, in line with the Arms Trade Treaty (p. 14). This is certainly heartening. Given Australia’s current role on the UN Security Council and New Zealand’s bid for a seat in the election this coming October, both countries also have the opportunity to influence other countries in this area, such as Russia, which continues to be a major supplier of arms and ammunition to Syria (and also gives only one percent of its fair share in humanitarian funding).

What about the second indicator? Here Australia and New Zealand have divergent rankings. Australia has pledged to offer 4064 places for Syrian refugees by the end of 2015. This is 103 per cent of what Oxfam calculates as its fair share of just five per cent of the 3.3 million Syrian refugees: a total of 179,500 people (p. 9). Meanwhile, New Zealand has pledged only 100 places: 19 per cent of its fair share. While not the worst performer, as many countries have pledged nothing (such as Spain, Italy, Greece, Czech Republic and Russia), it is still pitiful given New Zealand’s capacity to offer more.

Also of note on the New Zealand front, after Oxfam’s 2013 assessment, a colleague and I wrote a [letter](#) to the New Zealand Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs requesting New Zealand do more to help Syrians. Given the proportions of the Syrian crisis, we felt it appropriate to write to the Head of State. Prime Minister Key responded, referring the government response to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. To this day, we have not received a response from Minister McCully of Foreign Affairs. While reflecting this particular Minister’s approach to public accountability, it is also a signal of the neglect the New Zealand government applies to the Syrian situation: a crisis that has left 190,000 people dead, caused 9.5 million

people to flee their home or country (6.5 million internally displaced and 3 million refugees), and led to the destabilisation of the entire region. An epic security and humanitarian crisis.

Overall, both Australia and New Zealand need to do much better in funding Syrian humanitarian appeals. New Zealand can add to that a need to do more for Syrian refugees. For a country seeking election to the UN Security Council, it is not a good look.

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