

Karlsruhe, September 8th 2014

Iraqi Kurdistan: Reduce the children's distress

From August 21st to September 4th, the Friends of Waldorf Education sent a team of honorary emergency pedagogues to the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan in northern Iraq. They offered psychological first aid to traumatised children, all internally displaced Iraqis. The aid mission was carried out in cooperation with "Aktion Deutschland Hilft", the German Relief Coalition.

"Right at first sight the precarious living conditions the refugees have to endure are a shock to the human heart: people camp at the road-side or live in preliminary buildings" reports Bernd Ruf, head of mission and founder of the Emergency Pedagogic department "They live under catastrophic hygienic conditions and many emergency shelters have no sanitary facilities at all."

Children particularly suffer under such conditions, especially when they had to endure a cumbersome flight after the IS-militia expelled them from their homes. It is not easy to imagine what those children had to live through but it is a fact that they carry deep wounds from those encounters. This is where the emergency pedagogic measures of the Friends of Waldorf Education offer some relief: pedagogic and art-therapeutic methods foster the children's ability to process their traumatic experiences. Offers such as painting and art-therapy provide the option of nonverbal encounter and expression. Movement games and experiential pedagogy dissolve paralysation and restore inner and outer balance.

The team of volunteers, consisting of experiential educators, art therapists and early childhood educators visited the refugees in their emergency shelters. Many children's faces reflect the horrific experiences they had to endure: "We met children who suffer from flashbacks and regularly lose their consciousness or shun any form of social contact" Bernd Ruf reports. These children receive medical support from the doctor and the paramedic who accompany the team. Step by step and with a great measure of personal care, these children are carefully introduced to the emergency pedagogic measures. "After such a gradual approach together with a parent or a pedagogue, it is particularly elating to see such troubled children smiling and clapping, surrounded by other children. These are the kind of results, which refuel the team's energy level, as this work is highly demanding for the pedagogues.", says Bernd Ruf. The pedagogues worked in various emergency shelters, in schools, in preliminary buildings, and at the refugee camp Khanke. During this aid mission they were able to work with about 1500 children and adolescents.

Besides working with the children the emergency pedagogic team also offered relief to parents: Many parents are overburdened by the trauma-induced personality changes in their children's behavior. These personality changes include withdrawal, aggression, and regression. When parents gain a deeper insight into the progress and the consequences of a traumatizing experience this offers help and relief to the children as well as their parents.

The work on site was supported by local volunteers, whom the team trained in psycho-traumatology and emergency pedagogy. Many of these volunteers are students who had to flee from the toxic gas attacks of the Iraqi army in the 1980ies. The continuation of the Friends' work through the trained local assistants depends on the further development and the circumstances on site.

Emergency Pedagogy: Pedagogic First Aid

In violent conflicts bodily harm is accompanied by inner injuries, which are often very grave: Parents that could not protect their children and children that encountered violence, mutilation and death lose their inner balance and contract trauma-induced illnesses. The Friends of Waldorf Education work with Waldorf Educational methods and related therapy forms in order to help the children process their experiences. At the same time, the self-healing powers of affected people are activated. Experiential games help the children to rely on their own capabilities, as well as on the cooperation with fellow community members. Movement games have the capacity to release paralyzing states of shock. Art therapy establishes a space for non-verbal modes of expression, which create a distance to the experienced events.

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*The **Friends of Waldorf Education** are worldwide sponsors of a free education system. Since 1971 they advocate Waldorf education and the freedom of education systems. Since 1993 the office in Karlsruhe organizes and supervises international volunteer services, worldwide. Since summer 2011 it is possible to fulfill a 12-month civil service in anthroposophic institutions through the association.*

Since 2006 the Friends of Waldorf Education are active in the area of emergency pedagogy. Following the outbreak of a war or a natural disaster, they worked with psychologically traumatized children and adolescents in Lebanon (2006), China (2008 and 2013); Gaza (2009-2013), Indonesia (2009), Haiti (2010), Kyrgyzstan (2010), Japan (2011), and Kenya (2012-2013).

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Freunde der Erziehungskunst is a member of **Germany's Relief Coalition**, a union of German relief organisations that can provide rapid and effective aid in the case of large catastrophes and emergency situations abroad.

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