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## **Syria. Card. Zenari (Nuncio): “The people are growing desperate and poor. Forty thousand poor treated in open hospitals”**

“Sadly, after a decade of war, there is no light at the end of the tunnel in Syria. It’s an increasingly ailing and poor country. People stand in long lines to buy bread at government-subsidised bakeries, amidst countless war-wounded and diseased people suffering the after-effects of 10 years of bombing and explosives of all kinds that contaminated the natural environment. Suffice it to mention escalating cases of cancer, including children. On top of this, the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the situation, albeit not yet dramatically.”



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[. entrusted his heartfelt appeal to a video-message promoted by the AVSI organization on the situation in the Middle-Eastern country so dear to Pope Francis. These are the days leading up to Christmas, but there is nothing of the Christmas atmosphere here. The Nuncio remarked that Syria is burdened by a further tragedy, besides the endless conflict: "the pall of silence that risks falling over the war that has devastated Syria over the course of the last decade", as Pope Francis said last January. A similar yet stronger accusation was made by a Syrian journalist:](#)

[\*\*"We Syrians have died from all kinds of bombs and torture but what's harder to accept is to die in oblivion."\*\*](#)

[The "poverty bomb." In the past days, UN-mediated inter-Syrian talks to change the constitution of the country resumed in Geneva \(until December 4\). This piece of news could bring some hope were it not for the fact that Syria is being hit by a "poverty bomb" Card. Zenari said, quoting the latest UN data, "83 percent of Syrians live below the poverty line". The nuncio emphasized that "many people have died in Syria, it's hard to quantify the number, it's hard to estimate how many were injured, how many houses, neighbourhoods and villages were destroyed.](#)

[\*\*We are witnessing the annihilation of hope.\*\*](#)

[People are exasperated. They believed that once the bombing was over, they would see economic recovery and reconstruction." None of this has happened. There is only darkness at the end of the tunnel, worsened by international embargoes and sanctions. "Syria is increasingly desperate and poor."](#)



But it's still far from giving up. As testified by the Cardinal, who launched the "Open Hospitals" project four years ago with the purpose of ensuring free medical treatment also to the poorest, thanks to the involvement of three not-for-profit Catholic hospitals, the Italian and French hospitals in Damascus and the "St. Louis" hospital in Aleppo; the support of various donors, including the Italian Bishops' Conference, the "Policlinico Universitario Gemelli" foundation and the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, and the scientific support of AVSI - Association of Volunteers in International Service. "By the end of 2020 – said Card. Zenari - we will have attended to approximately 40 thousand- maybe more – poverty-stricken patients. The project continues throughout 2021, hoping to assist as many as 50,000 poverty-stricken patients." The thought of the Nuncio goes to thousands of people who were treated over the years, "when COVID-19 didn't exist yet. Countless people wounded by the war, also psychologically, such as children. They were traumatized by bombs, by explosions. Hundreds of thousands of blasts every day - the Cardinal recalled -. They polluted, damaged the environment, air and soil." This degradation is an underlying cause of many severe diseases, especially cancer, affecting the Syrians. **COVID-19.** The consequences of the spread of the virus in Syria are potentially catastrophic given the shortage of hospital beds, isolation wards and intensive care units, significantly increasing the mortality rate of the virus. Less than 5,000 cases were reported in mid-October, but by the end of November there were more than 7500 cases. These numbers are impossible to confirm as a result of the conflict and the situation of isolation in the country with many areas not controlled by the Government. In response to this critical situation, the Open Hospitals project, **AVSI** made known, "supports hospitals, enabling them to continue operating in complete safety, including the treatment of low-income patients funded under the project, and providing medical treatment to COVID-19 patients whenever possible."



Much work has been done, much still remains to be done, but the Nuncio said he is "pleased with two accomplished results. The first: to provide medical treatment to the poor. The second consists in mending social tears by admitting patients regardless of their ethnic-religious affiliation. Many people admitted in our hospitals are not Christian and are among the most grateful. They said they didn't expect free healthcare from Catholic hospitals." More help is needed to continue the good work. Cardinal. Zenari quotes Pope Francis' words, often expressed in reference to the COVID-19 pandemic: "We are all in the same boat. If water enters the boat all passengers are in danger. Let us mend the holes in the boat of humanity together." Many countries in the Western world are affected by the poverty and by the economic crisis caused by COVID-19, which, unlike Syria, have more tools to protect themselves. No hospitals

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in Syria are equipped to respond to the pandemic. "Everyone's help is needed", His Eminence said. "May our response be as compassionate as that of Jesus, during the multiplication of the loaves and fish, when he told the Apostles to feed the people following him. We are also waiting for something positive to happen, we are waiting for the miracles of the Lord also in Syria."

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