

**Petra Antoun:** “There would always be hope somewhere but now, everything is destroyed. There are still areas that were not affected directly, not destroyed but the people there are destroyed from inside.”

**Meghan Mast:** *That was Petra Antoun, MCC staff from Syria.*

*She lives in Tartous, Syria, and recently travelled to Aleppo where she spoke with me.*

*Today on the show, an update from Petra on the aftermath of the earthquakes in Syria and Türkiye.*

*I'm Meghan Mast and you're listening to “Relief, development and podcast,” a production of Mennonite Central Committee.*

*(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)*

*In the early morning hours of February 6, an earthquake with a magnitude of 7.8 hit southeastern Türkiye and northwestern Syria.*

*Several other earthquakes have hit since then, most recently two on February 20<sup>th</sup>.*

*At the time of this recording, there are reports that more than 45,000 people have died and tens of thousands of people are injured. Millions have been left homeless. And these numbers are likely to continue to grow.*

*Due to the past decade of conflict in Syria, many buildings had previously been impacted by war and neglect, making them vulnerable to shocks from the earthquake. Many families have also been displaced by conflict and are living in unfinished and unsafe buildings that are at higher risk for collapse.*

*Partners in Syria report that Aleppo has been heavily affected because so many of the buildings there (and in other parts of northern Syria) are already damaged due to the conflict. Many buildings have come down. Cold winter conditions are further impacting survivors as they look for shelter.*

*We're going to hear more now from Petra Antoun who is joining me today from Aleppo.*

*Welcome, Petra, thank you for joining us.*

**Petra:** Thank you for having me.

**Meghan:** And I want to start just by asking how you're doing.

**Petra:** I'm doing well, if we can say that. I felt the earthquake back like in Tartous where I live. But it's not, it wasn't the same as the people in Aleppo did. When I came to Aleppo, I felt a little bit of like, I don't know, I saw one of the buildings, they were getting it down, because it's it was not, has a lot of cracks, and they it wasn't safe so they decided to take it down. So I saw that and I was imagining how people were watching this on the same day of the earthquake or the coming days.

I couldn't sleep, honestly. And then I was saying, I should sleep. I am here to help. I'm here to do a needs assessment to check on the partners. So I have to sleep so I slept.

**Meghan:** I know you've been in Aleppo now for a few days. Can you describe how things are looking in Aleppo right now?

**Petra:** I don't know, I was walking the past two days, just looking about just checking if something would fall or most of the buildings are either destructed from war and then the earthquake or about to be like about fall. And also there are a lot of buildings that that have cracks on it. So, people are not feeling safe to go back yet, not speaking also about the trauma that they have been through. Or like they were saying, we were listening to the sound of Earth. This is the term most of the people in Aleppo were speaking about. They were listening to the sound of the earth. They thought that this is the end. Yeah.

**Meghan:** Something we take so for granted is that the ground beneath our feet is steady and to have that all of a sudden be giving way underneath you would be I imagine really troubling. And are you...

**Petra:** Yeah.

**Meghan:** And are you, oh, sorry. Go ahead.

**Petra:** Aleppo is the place where most of the destruction throughout the 12 years happened. But I cannot compare what happened to Aleppo for the past 12 years with this week. This week is harder was harder. It was more difficult on people. I can't compare the first day I entered Aleppo after the war ended here with the day I entered it after the earthquake. I would say it was more difficult for me to see what I've seen.

**Meghan:** And are you still feeling, I was reading that there are were a number of aftershocks after the earthquake. Are you still feeling some of that now?

**Petra:** Yes, we did. In the past 24 hours, I think around 70 happened. This is what the what the record says. I felt two difficult ones, like hard ones through the night around 3:30am Syria time, on the first night, I was here. But even if there was there was no vibration, like small ones happening, people's thought similar to mine. Without no like shaking, or it's the like the feelings. But I'm sure that most of it are like it's shaking, chills still shaking a bit. Yeah.

Half an hour from now or maybe more a bit. Another earthquake around 4.3 hit Lattakia. Also, Lattakia also another city in Syria, which was hit harshly by the earthquake in the coastal area. We didn't feel that in Aleppo, because it was the major thing came to Lattakia here today. So people in the street, they are scared. I can see my friends on Facebook, commenting and saying that we are scared similar to what happened a week ago. So, we don't know till when this will continue. But I'm sure it will last a bit. And people will keep [being] scared of going back to their house to do their normal tasks. Kids are afraid, they have this trauma, screams of their mothers, or whatever they have filled or lived.

**Meghan:** Wow. It sounds like some of the need that you're seeing is psychological. Like you said. What are some what are some of the biggest needs that you're seeing right now?

**Petra:** Before the earthquake, it was difficult for them to get their basic needs. And now after what's happened, many lost their jobs, because as I said, they live on daily basis work, but they lost that maybe out of destruction. Or maybe they are afraid to go back to do their normal work, normal businesses.

They need food. This is the base basic, basic need nowadays. The ones that they can use like canned food, because many lost their houses so that there's no kitchen to cook. So we need to think about that. For example. They need a place to stay in because now they are in the schools, like the main centers that we have are the school, the mosques, the churches, halls, and some other centers that they use for community. So there are many needs that we can help with. I mean, but this needs a lot of thinking, let's

say wisely and in coordination with other communities, other organizations on the ground, so no duplication will happen. And this is what we were doing a couple of days that we were doing, we were checking on partners and people as well as checking what are the needs and what they what each group or what each organization is going to focus on. Mainly now, they still need around a week to focus where to head or what exactly to help with, and then we can collect the info and see how we can help in a better way without duplication. So we need to think, what are the needs not only for now, but also for the couple of weeks to come, for the couple of months to come. But basically, now they need food. They need shelter.

**Meghan:** I want to acknowledge like, I'm hearing you talk about a lot of the need. But I know that yeah, it's still early days. And you're, like you said, trying to figure out how to respond. But I was curious, I know that people who are listening are going to be curious, is MCC and its partners responding already? Or is this sort of a collecting information stage?

**Petra:** I think it's both now. Because we are in the stage of finalizing the proposal, let's say or like putting the details that are needed. We are thinking about doing two things to interfere now, like within the couple of weeks to come in the coming two weeks, let's say. And then we are thinking about more time, like I'd say about six months, or a year to come, how to help those for the next couple of weeks. And how to help in the coming six months let's say.

So, we have we have some we have a vision, let's say on like clear [idea] of what we are going to do. So yes, MCC would help with food because the partners and the people on the ground said you cannot stop giving food because this isn't necessarily, but what is going to happen is to coordinate with the organization on the ground. Either through the church partners or other organizations working on the ground, we are going to work on the coming two weeks interfere and help. And this is going to happen through food baskets and hygiene kits. Because these are needed, especially diapers for kids or even sanitary pads for women. Because this is also great need. All the partners are asking for support in rent. And by the way they don't have in those centers. They don't have hot water to take a shower. So one of the partners were telling us, they were like at one of the schools which is a center, which is a school, so they don't have hot water or like they don't have bath, it's just a toilet, so they were like putting a cold water on the kids to shower them.

So, like imagine in Aleppo, it's very cold. It's the coldest city in Syria. I know you cannot compare it to Canada, sure. But for Syria, it's too cold.

Speaking about not having any kind of fuel, like we don't have fuel, any kind of heaters we don't have electricity most of the time, so you cannot....cold is a lot. It's a huge, huge matter here. This is what are the thoughts now. Maybe things would be changed. So now we are focusing our efforts on the coming two weeks, which are the food baskets and hygiene baskets.

But of course, through people and organized trusted organizations like MCC, they know who is taking these items. And there will be no replication neither of efforts or of baskets. We don't want one family to get from two resources and one not to take anything. So, yeah.

**Meghan:** Yeah, that sounds wise. And it sounds like a lot of thought is going into some of those decisions. I'm curious, what are some stories that you're hearing from people who've been impacted?

You've probably been meeting a lot of people on your visits, what are some of the stories that have stuck with you?

**Petra:** One of the partners was telling us that he was a bit sad, because there were there were families who, even during the 12 years of war, they never reached out to the church to give them any food basket or any help. But now with the earthquake, they are, they are reaching. So they lost their income, their shop was destroyed, or even if it's not destroyed. Like we were walking in the street—nobody is going to a shop to buy anything. I mean, you can find people buying food, but you will not like, "I'm going out for shopping to buy a jacket or shoes." Nobody is doing that now.

So those people who have these shops, like the clothes shops, they live on a basic, or like a daily basics, or incomes. So how will they live if nobody is buying from them? Yeah, so a lot of scenes, a lot of stories, a lot of things to think about.

While we help, while we pray, support. Many, many, many stories to think about. Many people left Aleppo. Many people stayed the whole night in their cars. I know that many, like there was a small car having more than nine people sleeping inside the car.

Kids are afraid to go back to the house, or even if they go back to the house they are afraid to stay in their rooms. They would prefer sleeping in another room, not the same one that they had. The older they get, the more traumatized they are.

**Meghan:** You've talked about this a bit already, but of course Syria had been facing hardship before the earthquakes through many years of war. Can you talk about the compounded challenges that Syria's facing?

**Petra:** Yeah, with the sanction issue. Sanctions were very hard on the Syrian people, like they were putting sanctions on the government but to be honest, they were on the people. Cause of that we don't have fuel to generate electricity, to have some heat during winter. To have bread, basic items, basic needs. The major thing that we always lose tracking of how much we have in Syria is the milk for kids, for example.

**Meghan:** Is that sort of the same as formula for babies?

**Petra:** Yeah, the formula. Okay. Yeah, formula. Traveling is an issue, when we are not able to travel all the time back to Lebanon, for example, or to Irbil, this is something that, if you want to get anything from outside, because we don't have a lot of items here. Sometimes medicine would be caught. But now, thankfully, a week before the earthquake, medicine were available, again.

It's too expensive, things are too expensive with the high exchange rate, for example, which is not stable, exchange rate is always unstable. So this would cost that everything is more expensive, all the time. Normal family will not be able to afford to get their basic needs because of the high costs which caused by the exchange rate, which caused by the sanctions. So everything is related. You cannot get fuel for your car. Unless money, you won't. If you have money, you can get whatever you want. If you have money, but not the vulnerable people won't have money, so they won't not be able to buy fuel to have some heat in their houses. Yeah, I mean, mainly fuel, electricity, exchange rate. The costs are high and expensive. These are the main things

**Meghan:** We are just getting to the end now of my questions. But I know that a lot of MCC supporters and people listening to the podcast are concerned about what's happening in Syria and Türkiye and yeah, wanting to know how to help. So we'll pass on some of the information as it's available about how people can support Syria right now. What would you say to MCC supporters who are expressing care and concern about people affected by the earthquake?

**Petra:** I would say thank you first, because I know how huge the work from MCC part and from the people who were trying to reach out to MCC to help. Really thank you and really appreciate that. You were able to do this effort trying to help the vulnerable people who were hit by both war and the earthquake. I would say keep praying for the people.

MCC's mission is not only to give money, it's a huge thing to give money because this is totally needed. For sure. It's totally needed. But also keeping people in your thoughts, in your prayers is a very good, is a very important thing.

It was a pleasure for me to, I don't know if pleasure is a good word to say, it's not pleasure. So grateful that I was able to come to Aleppo, to see the people, especially the partners and those people who are affected. The issue of sanction is a very important thing. So at any time anyone could do anything to help with that would be much appreciated not only for the earthquake response, or earthquake response, but also on the long term. Because after six months from now, I don't think that needs will be stopped after six month from now.

Why to keep these sanctions? Helping through money, helping through prayers, I appreciate whatever you are doing. Thank you for this, Meghan. I know this will help a lot. And I'm sure it will help a lot.

**Meghan:** Thanks for making time to speak with me. I know that your days are so full and it's a stressful time. So thanks for making time. I appreciate it. Was there anything else that you wanted to add?

**Petra:** I like taking pictures of hope. From what I was seeing in Aleppo, I was just searching for any kind of hope, any kind of like a way to take a picture that would look like this is a good thing to mention there is there would always be hope in somewhere. But now, everything is destroyed somehow the souls, the people who died, the destruction of houses around. There are still areas that were not affected directly, not destroyed, but the people there are destroyed from inside. Keep looking for hope. We don't want just to look for destruction, you want to rebuild those people's hearts by supporting them. In every sense, not only as I said not only by sending money but by sending love. In what kind sense of love that we can we can do?

We were celebrating Valentine's Day on the 14th of February. So I was happy to be here on the 14th of February to celebrate Valentine's Day in action. And that was an opportunity. I'm thankful to love through MCC. So MCC is love and hope and faith in action. Thank you.

**Meghan:** That's really beautiful. Thanks for sharing that. And what a lovely way to think about Valentine's Day in a different way. I imagine that right now is the time of grieving and there's a lot of loss that people in Syria are facing. And I hope that the day comes soon where you start to see that hope. Too.

Petra: Hopefully.

**Meghan:** Okay, thanks so much, Petra.

**Petra:** Thank you, Meghan.

**Meghan:** *That was Petra Antoun, an MCC staff person in Syria.*

*Since we spoke, MCC approved a project with Parish of St. Francis in Syria to provide approximately 4,000 people with emergency ready-to-eat foods, hygiene items and diapers for babies. Of course, our response will continue to unfold as we work with local partners to decide what is most needed.*

*On February 17, MCC U.S. signed a statement along with 15 other national faith organizations, urging the United States to lift sanctions on Syria and expedite humanitarian assistance after the earthquake. MCC recognizes that sanctions and their collateral effects have already caused the people of Syria dire harm.*

*If you'd like to support MCC's response to the earthquake, please visit our website. I'll include a link to the page in the show notes.*

*This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was recorded and produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.*

*This episode was produced and hosted by me, Meghan Mast. The head producer is Emily Loewen.*

*A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.*

*Thanks and take good care.*

*(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)*

**Show notes:**

- To support MCC's response to the earthquake in Syria and Türkiye, click [here](#).