



Morgane Bernardie, volunteer in Syria and Iraq

Rob I'm speaking to Morgane Bernardie who is a young lady who has just come back from Syria. You were there a couple of months I gather.

Morgane Yes, almost three months. I was there for twelve weeks in total, in Iraq and Syria.

Rob Why choose to go to a place which we understand to be a war zone?

Morgane Because in my sense, uh, I, I thought it was also the place that needed most help. Because it's a war zone they need to rebuild a lot of things, so it was specifically in a war zone that I wanted to go.

Rob What kind of things were you doing there?

Morgane Mainly what the association I left with is doing is reconstruction, rebuilding sites. There was a large amount of projects from activities with the kids, with women I did a womans only cafe in Iraq because they are not really tolerated in bars and to go out without their husbands usually. One of my projects as well we were going to meet families in evaluating their needs and doing material donations. Fridge-freezer, sometimes little batteries for electricity and yes it's very, very wide all the projects we are doing but it's mainly rebuilding.

Rob Are you a volunteer for an association?

Morgane Yes - an association called SOS Chrétiens d'Orient. Now they are present in five countries - Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Egypt.

Rob This is an organisation that helps Christians? They're a minority presumably in all these countries?

Morgane Yes, Christians in these countries are in, in a dangerous situation. They've been targetted a lot in the past few years, so a lot of them are leaving but its important for them to remain in these lands because it's historically the birth of Christian religion is in Mesopotamia, around this place, so its really important that they stay there because its a part of their Christian history as well. But we were not only helping Christians, we were also doing activities with the Yazidi which is a very old religion and they are also a minority. There has been so much destruction I was really amazed at the amount of buildings destroyed everywhere. It's something to see it on TV, but when you see it from your own eyes you understand how important the destruction was and, like 80% of the cities are destroyed, it's huge, it's massive.

Rob Did you ever feel you were in danger?



Morgane I felt pretty safe the whole time because you are surrounded with people that have known a lot worse, so they don't jump every time they hear a rocket, or, uh, the first time when I arrived in Aleppo for example you could hear every evening the rockets, and it would make the house shiver and, yeah, so the war was really close and for me it was hard to adapt to. But then, in the end, you end up having to get used to it because otherwise you won't be able to work - it's every day, so....

Rob We hear so much about Syria, and the dangers, but also we hear about radicalisation. Did you have to go through some kind of screening before you went?

Morgane Not me actually, I escaped this kind of questionings, but I heard a lot of volunteers that went with the same association had to answer a lot of the questions before going. In the end its good that we have all these questions, even though I didn't get them. I think it's important because you can't send everybody. A lot of people actually went there to join the Jihad so I think it's a good think that the government checks who is going and why.

Rob We're here in an exhibition hall in the centre of Rostrenen where your photographs are displayed. What are you trying to show with your photographs?

Morgane Well I'm trying to show what you don't see on TV, because on TV you can only see destruction and war and people all dressed in black. I wanted to show the people that actually live there. You never see the civilians on TV. There's so much life and there's a huge culture and it's something that you need to show because, when I was talking with them, they feel forgotten really. They see our medias, they see CNN, BBC and they see that what we know of Syria is only war and they really want to appear with their culture, with their strengths, with their happiness as well and they want this to reach people all over the world instead of just destruction and war.

Rob You were in Syria, you were in Iraq. Did you find any differences?

Morgane The culture is very different. I was amazed, I, I didn't realise how different the countries were. Iraq is more traditional, especially for the woman status in those countries. In Iraq, as a girl, you can't go out in the streets with another boy if he's not your husband and you can't smoke in the street, you can't go for a drink. Usually they just don't get out if they're not with their husband, or something. Only on weddings, or...

Rob Is this in Baghdad or were you elsewhere?

Morgane No, I was close to Mosul in a Christian village about thirty kilometres North of Mosul. It's a Christian village but the traditions are there still. Girls don't cover their hair but there are a lot of other very patriarchal traditions that remain, whereas in Syria when I arrived I was amazed, the girls they just hang out together and they

go out to smoke Shisha. They can have drinks. Muslims and Christians are a lot more mixed in the cities. They, they can go out together and there is a lot of understanding between the two religions. It's a very secular state.

Rob Now that you're home safe, will you be going back there?

Morgane I would love to. As I am going as a volunteer I don't manage to make a lot of money as a volunteer. So I am going to work for a few months and, hopefully, go back there as soon as possible, which would be next year, around May.

Rob Intrepid volunteer, Morgane Bernardie, thank you very much for your time.

Morgane Thank you. Thank you very much.