

# Proud to be Tunisian

Elizabeth Eyster, Houda Chalchoul and Carole Lalève

Last year's civil war in Libya caught the world by surprise. Nobody was prepared, least of all neighbouring Tunisia, deep into its own revolution. By 27 February, more than 10,000 people were crossing the border between Tunisia and Libya each day. Tunisia responded by keeping its borders with Libya open and Tunisians from around the country mobilised support for the thousands of foreigners entering their territory in desperate, difficult conditions.

Tunisians who wanted to help in the relief effort found every means to do so, ranging from a company providing huge quantities of milk to an elderly woman travelling by bus to bring home-cooked food for the refugees. Staff working for a transport company took it upon themselves to mobilise a pool of vehicles to transfer people arriving from Libya to shelters, to Djerba airport and to other locations in Tunisia. Overnight shelters sprang up in schools, recreation centres and hostels.

One doctor travelled hundreds of kilometres to offer his services. When he discovered that the Tunisian Red Crescent's policy is not to take on new and untrained volunteers while a humanitarian response operation is underway, he was undeterred. He made a personal donation towards the relief effort and then started work picking up the rubbish left behind by the huge numbers of people passing through.

Red Crescent volunteer Hafedh has vivid memories of a Tunisian cook who arrived at Shousha transit camp. The cook brought bread and rice he had

prepared beforehand, planning to spend only one day in Shousha. "But the sight of thousands of people, exhausted, traumatised and hungry, moved him and made him return the next day, with his friends," explains Hafedh. "This group of volunteer cooks put up a tent... and set about preparing meals for the residents of the camp. They provided cooked meals for the camp for two weeks, using provisions brought to them by local citizens. Then the International Committee of the Red Cross began funding them, and that is how Shousha's main kitchen was born, providing 23-28,000 meals a day."

In Tunisia's southernmost province of Tataouine, Tunisians welcomed some 80,000 Libyans into their homes, causing not inconsiderable financial difficulties for themselves as utility bills soared. When UNHCR officials offered Tunisian families assistance to cover their water, gas and electricity bills, many took offence, replying: "We don't expect any compensation." UNHCR then entered into a contract with the Tunisian utility companies to provide subsidies directly.

The Tunisians' outpouring of generosity came without instructions or high-level orchestration – people simply acted, responding not with fear but with compassion.

Elizabeth Eyster [eyster@unhcr.org](mailto:eyster@unhcr.org) is Deputy Representative, Houda Chalchoul [chalchou@unhcr.org](mailto:chalchou@unhcr.org) is Assistant Legal Officer and Carole Lalève [laleve@unhcr.org](mailto:laleve@unhcr.org) is Reporting Officer with UNHCR Tunisia office.

*Shousha transit camp was established in Ras Jdir, 7km from the Tunisia-Libya border, to accommodate those fleeing Libya. As of June 2012, it still hosts just under 3,000 refugees awaiting a durable solution.*

