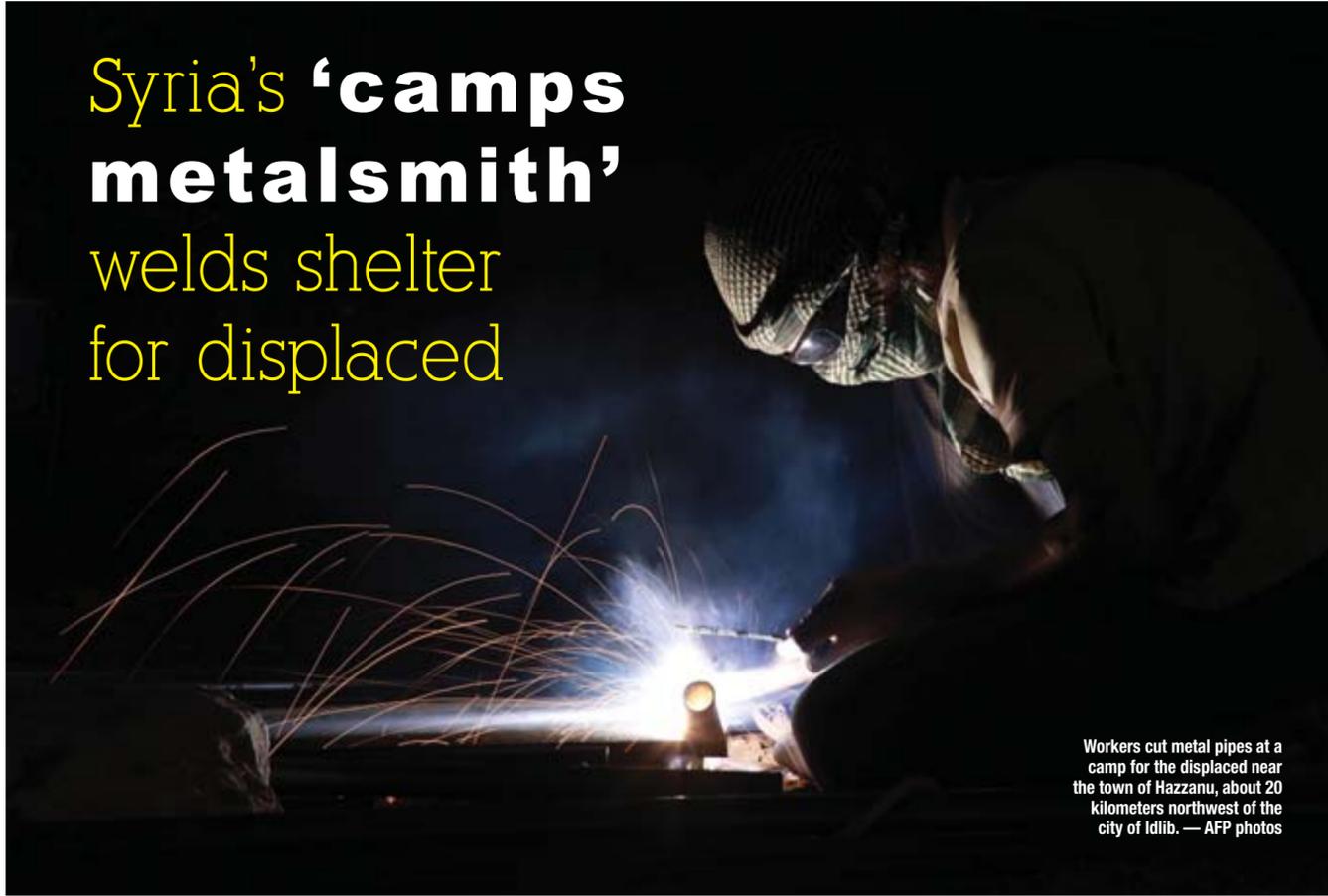


Syria's 'camps metalsmith' welds shelter for displaced



Workers cut metal pipes at a camp for the displaced near the town of Hazzanu, about 20 kilometers northwest of the city of Idlib. — AFP photos



Crouched between olive trees in northwest Syria, Jumaa al-Mustayf cuts long metal tubes with an electric saw to make tent frames for families displaced by war. With winter approaching in Idlib province, the man nicknamed "metalsmith of the camps" says his welding skills are in especially high demand. "So far the orders keep on coming," says the skinny 34-year-old, his skin sunburnt from days working out in the open.

placed from other parts of the country by fighting. Mustayf says he once ran a successful metalwork business in southeast Idlib, but two years ago the war forced him and his family to flee their home.

"I had to build my own tent to live in it. People saw it and they started placing orders. So I got to work," he says. On a patch of red earth near the village of Hazano, Mustayf has set up a makeshift workshop to supply residents in the nearby camp with sturdy frames to shelter them from a wet winter. Two men unload dozens of long metal poles from a small truck, stacking them on the ground. Hanging nearby, a modest cardboard sign reads: "Metalsmith of the camps".

A family business

Barehanded and sandal-clad, Mustayf saws through metal, sending sparks flying as he prepares parts for his latest order. The high-pitched screech of his saw temporarily drowns out the sound of a hammer banging on iron and the loud spluttering of nearby generators. A woman dressed in a long red robe and headscarf watches from afar, sitting cross-legged on a mat in the shade of an olive tree.

The metalsmith welds the structure together with one hand, the other clutching a welder's mask to keep sparks off his face. To help with the workload, he has enlisted the help of a few cousins and even his 13-year-old

nephew, who quit school to help his family make ends meet. In a month, Mustayf has sold 150 tents. Shelters handed out by non-governmental organizations are too small for large families, he says.

"They're good at withstanding rain and strong winds," he says of his own tent frames. The smallest frame he sells covers four by four meters and costs almost \$150, while the largest covers 36 square meters and goes for \$320. Customers then have to buy an outer shell of waterproof fabric from another

supplier, and pay someone else to lay a cement base for the tent. But despite the orders, Mustayf says his profits are slim. "We make little-just enough to live off and cover the family's needs," he says.

Indebted for a new tent

Eight years into the Syrian civil war, Idlib is one of the last parts of the country to escape regime control. Russia-backed regime forces pummeled the region for months over the spring and summer, killing around

1,000 civilians and displacing 400,000 people from their homes. Russia announced a truce in late August, but the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group says sporadic bombardment and clashes continue.

Reslan Mohammed, his wife, and eight children fled their home three years ago and have been living outdoors ever since. But this autumn, he decided it was time for a new dwelling. "The tent we have is not made for winter," the 48-year-old says. Scraping together enough money, he ordered Mustayf's smallest tent frame. Dressed in a long beige robe and wearing a scarf on his head, he watches as men carry the finished product to his family's patch in the camp.

Small children swing excitedly from the metal bars before they are even set in place. "I borrowed money from relatives and friends" to buy the new tent frame, Mohammed says. The new frame in place, he covers it with a patchwork of old blankets. They roll a large woven plastic rug over the earth and lay a thin mattress on top. Mohammed would also have liked a cement floor, but for the moment that luxury is too expensive. — AFP



Jumaa al-Mustayf welds metal pipes at a camp for the displaced near the town of Hazzanu.

Idlib has come under repeated bombardment by the Damascus regime and its Russian ally this year, causing hundreds of thousands of civilians to flee north towards the border with Turkey. More than three million people live in the jihadist-held region, and around half of them are already dis-



Children play with the frame of a tent at a camp for the displaced near the town of Hazzanu.



From Goya to Rubens, visitors marvel at Spanish duke's art-filled palace

Home to one of Spain's most important private art collections that includes paintings by Goya, Velazquez and Rubens, the Liria Palace was for decades Madrid's best kept cultural secret. But over 14,000 people have so far visited the home of the 19th Duke of Alba, the head of one of Spain's oldest and richest aristocratic houses, since it opened its doors to the general public in September and there is a two-month waiting period for tickets.

"The social pressure to see the collection was strong," said Alvaro Romero Sanchez-Arjona, head of the culture department at the Casa de Alba Foundation which runs the 18th century palace located near the bustling Gran Via, the Spanish capital's main shopping street.

Its most notable paintings include a portrait by Francisco Goya of the 13th Duchess of Alba that was recently returned after being leased to the Thyssen museum in Madrid, as well as portraits of other members of the five centuries-old House of Alba by Titian and Rubens.

The library, decorated in a vivid shade of emerald, displays a collection of letters by Christopher Columbus, a first edition of Miguel de Cervantes' classic "Don Quixote" from 1605, and the Alba Bible—the first Spanish translation of the Old Testament. Other treasures include luxurious tapestries and porcelain belonging to France's last empress and wife of Napoleon III, Maria Eugenia de Montijo, who died at the palace in 1920.

The Liria Palace was occupied by Communists during Spain's 1936-39 Civil War and was gutted by several fires that left just the four outer walls standing. But the priceless collection of paintings survived because they were stored in the cellars of the Prado museum and the Bank of Spain.

'Like a Zara window'

Duke Carlos Fitz-James Stuart and his family continue to live on the second floor of the palace which is off limits to the public but 12 rooms on the lower floors can be visited. This is the third palace that the Albas have opened for public visits since the death in 2014 of the duke's mother, the 18th Duchess of Alba who according to the Guinness Book of Records had more aristocratic titles than any other person on the planet.

Known for her shock of frizzy hair, flamboyant manner and outrageous clothes, the thrice-married duchess who was born in the Liria Palace was frequently photographed at society weddings and bullfights. She made headlines in 2011 when at the age of 85 she married a civil servant who was 24 years younger.



properties to visitors is a way to raise funds to help offset the huge costs of their upkeep.

But the decision to allow the public in Liria Palace has divided the Albas. The fifth son of the 18th Duchess of Alba, Cayetano Martinez de Irujo, blasted the move in an autobiography published in September in which he also recalled how he and his siblings were raised by nannies who beat them with bamboo canes, and lived a youth full of sex and cocaine. "My home will become a showcase like a Zara window," he wrote, referring to the popular Spanish-owned clothing chain. — AFP

These handout pictures from the Casa de Alba Foundation, show rooms at the Palacia de Liria, in Madrid. — AFP photos