

Statement of Dr. Fayssal Mikdad
at the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Refugees in Urban Settings
(Geneva, 9 December 2009)

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for choosing the topic of “Challenges for Persons of Concern to UNHCR in Urban Settings”, since the numbers of refugees in the cities are increasing and their percentage among the overall refugees is going high, in addition to the consequences resulted from the increasing burdens laid on the host communities in all aspects of life.

We , at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Syrian Arab Republic and the other respective ministries and authorities in our country, followed up with interest the preparation process for this dialogue , hoping that this dialogue will assist in increasing the capacities of the host countries and the supporting organizations, particularly the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in dealing with this current and future type of asylum which opposes the traditional form of asylum where refugees mainly live in camps located on the borders. Our interest with this issue emerged from our belief in enhancing and consolidating our constructive cooperation with the United Nations and its specialized agencies, based on the directions of our leader, Mr. President Bashar Al-Assad , who assures all support to the international community in establishing successfully the principle of justice and constructive cooperation all over the world, and also to encourage all the countries and organizations to assume their responsibilities in dealing with the world's challenges today including those related to asylum and protection.

The Syrian government and people are dealing with all refugees as temporary guests. These considerations contributed to the decrease of problems emerged as a result of the presence of refugees and within the host community. Unlike what's happening in other communities, there is co-existence between the two populations with no discrimination of any form. However, the massive influx of Iraqi refugees over a limited period of time had undoubtedly significant impact on the different aspects of life in the host communities wherever the refugees reside.

In this context, please allow me to express our appreciation, particularly to Mr. Antonio Guterres, the High Commissioner for Refugees, for the distinguished role he played in shedding the light on the crisis of the Iraqi refugees in Syria and other countries, and for his efforts to call for support and assistance for the Iraqi refugees and for the host countries in order to provide them with their basic needs until their return to their homeland.

Although it is difficult to have an accurate number for the refugees and their places in Syria since they are not living in tents on the borders but dispersed in all the Syrian cities, the estimated number for the refugees residing currently in Syria is 1.5 million. This number constitutes 10% of the Syrian population, where about 1.2 million are Iraqi refugees and 470.609 are Palestinian refugees, in addition to other refugees from Asia and Africa.

The majority of Iraqi refugees are concentrated in Rural Damascus and Damascus while the rest are dispersed in the different Syrian governorates, especially in Aleppo, Homs, Hassakah, Der El-Zour and Lattakia, according to the following statistics:

Governorate	Number of Refugees (in Thousands)	Percentage (%)
Rural Damascus	744	62
Damascus	376	23
Aleppo	60	5
Homs	48	4
Other governorates	72	6

Due to the fact that refugees live in cities in Syria unlike the traditional pattern, their needs go beyond the standard needs for refugees in general to include the needs for houses, job opportunities and local services, in addition to what can secure a minimum standards of living in a dignified manner. . Thus, the number of refugees residing in the cities has recently increased and their percentage among the total number of refugees has also become higher. This increased the negative effects on the overall economic, social, educational and health aspects of life, as well as, the infrastructure and the development plans.

With regard to the **economic sector**, the presence of tens of thousands of Iraqi and Palestinian families inside the main cities and in the suburbs constitute an enormous pressure on the efforts exerted by the local authorities to achieve the local development:

- The size of the informal sector in the Syrian economy increased. This has negatively affected the income distribution and re-distribution. Iraqi refugees, in particular, have placed an extra pressure on the job opportunities as the majority is working in the informal sector in Syria and earning small wages which do not exceed 5000 S.P. per month. Iraqi refugees are competing with the local population on job opportunities; some of them are having two jobs. This contributed to the increase of unemployment rate.

- The average growth rate per capita of the special consumption and of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has decreased by 2 %. This has a direct impact on the deterioration of the living conditions.
- The inflation rate has increasingly accelerated since mid 2005, and it reached 10% in 2006 and 15% in 2008. The main reason for the inflation is attributed to the significant increase in prices of food items resulted from the increased demand on certain commodities, in addition to the increase of real estate prices even in the popular areas where people with low-income and poor generally live.
- On the other hand, refugees in general , and the Iraqis in particular are benefiting from the direct and indirect subsidies and the free governmental services as follows:

Fields of support	2004	2005	2006	2007
Power and Water	7.2 (billion S.p.)	15.6	22.3	31.9
Education	3	3.5	4	4.6
Health	2.7	3.3	3.7	4.1
Total	12.9	22.4	30	40.2

- We can observe the increase in the consumption of the subsidized items, especially in the power and water sector which has notably increased from 7.2% in 2004 to 31.9% in 2007. This could have an impact on the sustainability of these resources especially electricity, petrol and water, and could lead to the adoption of the principle of rations in services due to the increase of the production costs.

With regard to the **education sector** it is considered as one of the important sectors that should be focused on, due to its important role in protecting children and adolescents from being in the streets of the cities, and from any form of abuse or immoral activities which is not for the benefit of neither the Syrian nor the Iraqi society. Enrolment of children in schools will bring long-term benefits to both societies through prevention of illiteracy;

- The presence of the Iraqi refugees in Syria has negatively and notably affected the education sector, as the number of students in each class in the primary education doubled (about 45 to 60 students in the class), especially in the areas of concentration of the Iraqi refugees, such as Jaramana, Qudsiya, Harasta, Aadra and Barzeh. Public education in Syria is free and education is compulsory between the ages of 6 to 15 years (from the first grade until the ninth grade).
- The total number of the Iraqi students enrolled at the Syrian formal schools reached 33249 students for the school year (2008-2009) . The biggest number of students was enrolled in Rural Damascus schools 15395 students, in addition to 7719 students in Damascus schools and

3745 students in Aleppo governorate. The estimated cost for enrolling these students is 13.7 million US\$ per annum. This cost was covered by the government of the Syrian Arab Republic.

- As a result, there was a need to increase the budget to support schools in order to: provide teachers, administrators, and cover the operational costs (school books, educational aids, electricity and water....).

With regard to the **health sector**, the pressure on the health services increased, health services are almost free of charge as they are subsidised by the government. In addition to that, many of the refugees are suffering from physical or psychological problems as a result of the security situation prevailed in their country of origin. Due to the big number of refugees, there is still a need to equip two hospitals with 200 beds, and equip number of clinics especially in the cities to serve the Iraqi refugees and the host communities.

With regard to the **administration sector**, the huge number of refugees, which is considered larger than the population of some of the United Nations member-states, constituted a burden on the different governmental administrations, which had to administrate all the above-mentioned services. Consequently, hundreds of new employees were recruited to follow up the situations of refugees and deal with all civil and criminal matters as well as other services.

In spite of all the enormous efforts exerted by the government and people of the Syrian Arab Republic to help the refugees in general, and the Iraqi refugees in particular in ways that preserve their dignity until they return back to their homeland, this burden is a big one and exceeds Syria's capacity to deal with it alone. Especially that Syria is an underdeveloped country where the citizen's income does not exceed 1200 US\$ annually. According to the estimations, the cost incurred by the Syrian government as a result of hosting the Iraqi refugees is about 2 billion US\$ annually. Whereas the expenses allocated for the Palestinian refugees residing in Syria and registered in the records of the "The General Commission of Palestinian Refugees" for the year 2008, reached 180.010.125 US\$.

Although Syria is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or 1967 Protocol, the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2003 has respected the temporary protection regime extended by UNHCR. Thus, refugees in Syria are generally enjoying all the rights which Syrian citizens enjoy without any discrimination, with the exception of certain issues related to their situation as refugees. In this respect, it should be emphasised that providing a protection space for the refugees should be part of the protection provided by the countries depending on their capacities and assessment of the refugees' needs.

According to the Syrian law, foreigners and refugees have the right to own transportation means open bank accounts in the private and public banks and

own any commodities that the Syrian law does not prevent the Syrians from owning them. According to article 4 from law no. 11 issued in 2008, it is allowed for the non-Syrians to own properties in emergency situations by a decree issued based on an instruction from the cabinet. Additionally, non-Syrians can have a renewable lease contract for a period which exceeds 15 years in administrative areas and municipalities. Furthermore, the Iraqi refugees in Syria enjoy a space of protection. The security incidents are rare, and have been dealt with in a proper and reasonable manner with no discrimination. This corresponds to the call of UNHCR to provide a protection space for refugees in host countries.

Moreover, refugees from all nationalities have the right to occupy public and private jobs in the State by signing contracts with them for this purpose. Palestinian refugees are allowed to hold positions in the government sector while keeping their original nationality. They also enjoy freedom of movement and the right to choose where to live.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We strongly believe that the most suitable solution for the Iraqi refugees is to secure conditions for return to their country. As their problem is a temporary and resulted from the US occupation. Therefore voluntary repatriation is considered to be the best solution when the situation becomes conducive. Resettlement should not be considered as main solution: resettlement should be considered as temporary and exceptional solution while we strongly support the voluntary repatriation as a durable solution for refugees.

In this context, the Syrian Arab Republic believes that the international organizations should maintain their defined mandates without overlapping, and while welcoming the provision of humanitarian assistance provided by some organizations to those who are in need, Syria does not support the gradual change of this assistance to legitimate tasks outside the organizations' mandate. Syria also support the High Commissioner's statement before the General Assembly "the reform in UNHCR is not a technical nor a mere concept, it is about finding the required resources to protect the largest possible number of refugees, save their lives and return back the largest number of them to their homelands in safety and dignity".

In this regard, I consider it important to refer to the efforts exerted by the international community which are considered little and insufficient. Since 2003, following the arrival of the Iraqi influx and until now, the Iraqi government has paid only 15 million US \$ to the Syrian government. This is the only amount offered by the Iraqi government to support its citizens living in Syria despite the huge resources they have. This amount is very small amount comparing to what was offered by the Syrian government to the Iraqis.

Finally, I would like to thank the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Damascus for its efforts to alleviate the suffering of the Iraqi refugees, and its full cooperation with the government of the Syrian Arab Republic which reached the level of real partnership due to the mutual confidence and common objective. I would like also to thank the other international organizations for their contributions and cooperation with the Syrian authorities.

I would like also to express the readiness of the Syrian government to work with UN agencies, and our willingness to provide sincere support to refugees until their return to their cities and towns in dignity to build and develop with the rest of Iraqi people their country.
