



Humanitarian Briefing on the Crisis in Iraq

Iraq's humanitarian emergency requires immediate recognition and support. Above all, it is fundamentally rooted in a protection and human rights crisis, which together are fuelling a climate of lawlessness and impunity with profound consequences for innocent civilians. Indeed, the sheer scale of violence directed against Iraqi civilians is unparalleled to any other emergency in the world today. The provision of basic social services has been severely compromised by insecurity, population movements, brain-drain, and an incremental breakdown of public service infrastructure and systems. Furthermore, families and communities continue to be fractured by conflict and the politics of identity. The sharply deteriorating humanitarian situation over the past few years has yielded a number of devastating indicators: 2 million Iraqis are now estimated to have fled the country; and nearly 1.9 million are estimated to be internally displaced persons (IDPs), of which about 800,000 individuals have been uprooted since February 2006. This means that almost one in six Iraqis is now living in displacement. An estimated 4 million are also considered to be acutely food insecure and entirely dependent on a fledgling public distribution system (PDS) for their basic nutritional requirements, while another 8 million are under threat of becoming food insecure should the ration system completely collapse. Escalating violence and human rights violations, compounded by a diminishing ability to meet basic needs and to absorb any further shocks, are pushing already vulnerable Iraqis into a crisis of survival. This situation can only be addressed through a concerted effort by all concerned parties to support an empowered role for the UN to act as a neutral mediator based on humanitarian imperatives and to re-establish the conditions for humanitarian space so that the government and people of Iraq can be assisted in averting a full-scale humanitarian disaster.

1. The Humanitarian Crisis in Iraq

Over the past decades, Iraqis have suffered from a number of successive humanitarian dislocations, all of which have taken their toll on current living conditions and the prospects for future human development. This leaves the population increasingly vulnerable to the shocks (i.e. conflict, loss of income, displacement or interruption of food supply) that have occurred over the past months. Iraq's humanitarian situation drastically declined following the bombing of the Al-Askari Shrine in Samarra on 22 February 2006, which sparked increased sectarian violence and resulted in mass displacements and further disruptions to the delivery of basic services. As such, the rate of internal displacements increased from **148,000** between 2003 and 2005 to **800,000** from 2006 onwards.¹ As a result, host communities are overwhelmed, and basic service infrastructures, formerly considered amongst the best in the region, have been unable to cope with these unprecedented stresses and disruptions.

Protection of Civilians

Iraq's civilian population lives in continual fear as they are faced with violence perpetrated by armed groups, criminal gangs, religious extremists, militias, as well as operations by security and military forces. The violence is primarily taking its toll on innocent civilians, who account for the majority of casualties and fatalities at a sheer scale of which is unparalleled in any other emergency occurring in the world today. Widespread violence, sectarian prejudice and terror

hamper the enjoyment of basic rights and freedoms by the population at large. In addition, human rights violations ranging from violent death to

discrimination on the basis of creed, political and religious affiliation, gender, sexual orientation and professional groups have had enormous consequences on the population. During 2006, a recorded total of **34,452** civilians were killed and **36,685** were wounded.² In other words, **94** Iraqi civilians died violently every day throughout 2006 with a similar number wounded. The vast majority of victims are men, leaving untold numbers of widows and children without their primary caregiver; pushing them further into crisis and creating a large pool of silent victims in urgent need of aid. The problem is further compounded by the fact that at least **40%** of Iraq's professionals have left Iraq.³ The ongoing violence has resulted in a basic survival crisis for the displaced and perhaps even greater suffering for those too poor or unable to move from their homes to safety, and who are receiving poor to non-existent basic services, such as drinking water, sanitation, food and medical assistance.

Poverty

The situation is exacerbated by pervasive poverty. Iraq in recent years has seen low levels of investment, economic stagnation, rising inflation, unemployment

¹ UNHCR Iraq. (2007, February). *IDP report*.

² UNAMI. (2006, 1 November to 31 December). *Human Rights Report*, (p. 4).

³ Campbell, J.H., O'hannon, M.E. (2007, February 22). *Brookings Institution Iraq Index*, (p 22).
<http://www.brookings.edu/fp/saban/iraq/index.pdf>

of over **25-40%**,⁴ and increasing poverty with **54%** of Iraqis living on less than **US\$1** per day, including **15%** who are forced to live on **US\$0.50** per day.⁵ The annual inflation rate in Iraq jumped to an estimated **70%** in July 2006.⁶

Food

The general perception currently is that the Government of Iraq's (GoI) Public Distribution System (PDS) food ration has ceased to function in some districts and is only partially functioning in others, with incomplete rations being provided, due to declining security conditions, breakdowns in the supply chain or pilfering/criminality. This brings deep concern when the World Food Programme (WFP) reports that, "For the poor and food insecure population, the PDS ration represents by far the single most important food source in the diet."⁷ **Four million** Iraqis are food insecure and **47%** of Iraqis are highly dependent on the PDS.⁸ Malnutrition among children aged **6 months to 5 years** in Iraq is widespread. **Forty-three percent** of these children are suffering from a form of malnutrition: **23%** suffer from chronic malnutrition, **12%** suffer from general malnutrition, and **8%** suffer from acute malnutrition.⁹ As a result, **18%** of these children are suffering from growth stunting.¹⁰ A human development crisis is the fate of the Iraqi population, **39%** of whom were below **15 years** of age in 2004.¹¹ As the humanitarian situation has deteriorated, the rate of malnutrition has increased.

Water & Sanitation

Up to **30%** report irregular access to vital drinking water¹² and **43%** of households are deprived of healthy sanitation facilities.¹³ Water supplies have worsened, indicated by the increased incidence of diarrhoeal diseases throughout the population.¹⁴

Health

Health facilities suffered a dramatic decline under international sanctions with one-third of hospital beds

closed, half of all hospital equipment non-functioning and many departments not having functioning toilets.¹⁵ In 2003, Iraq had only **53** physicians per **100,000** inhabitants, which is about one third that of its neighbours in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan.¹⁶ The situation has deteriorated since then. The targeting of professionals for violence and the brain drain is particularly pronounced in the health system. As a result, **12,000** of **34,000** doctors have left Iraq, **250** have been kidnapped, and **2,000** physicians have been murdered since the 2003 US Invasion.¹⁷ The healthcare system cannot cope with the unprecedented stresses of more patients but fewer health care practitioners. Emergency response and care mechanisms are not equipped to cope with the huge numbers of injured and dead. At the same time, the security of health facilities has been compromised in some areas. Health facilities must be respected and protected by all parties to the conflict, in accordance with international humanitarian law.

Shelter

Within Iraqi culture, it is preferred to find shelter with family and friends, rather than move into other shelter. However, many IDPs have no choice but to move into public buildings, such as schools or clinics, other buildings such as factories, or in the worst circumstances, camping in makeshift structures on public lands or in the desert. Shared accommodations suffer from overcrowding, and subsequent stress on infrastructure, as reported by UN-HABITAT: "(I)nfrastucture problems have created slum-like housing conditions in much of Iraq's cities... The ultimate effect is a growing housing deficit and substandard living conditions."¹⁸

Education

Education has been compromised by the lack of schools, teachers, registration documents, funds and supplies. Skilled teachers have left the country, or are afraid to come to schools, which have recently become targets for suicide bombers. Other schools are occupied by IDPs or armed groups, or have been damaged beyond use during fighting. Reasons for non-attendance include language barriers, discrimination, and child labour. Efforts to preserve Iraqi children's fragile educational progress are fundamental to help children survive the crisis.

2. Acutely Vulnerable Iraqis

Vulnerability in Iraq takes many forms. Poverty, discrimination and the result of violence have left entire communities at risk. Millions of Iraqis are in need of immediate protection and humanitarian assistance.

⁴ Campbell, J.H., O'hanlon, M.E. (2007, February 22). *Brookings Institution Iraq Index*, (p31).
<http://www.brookings.edu/fp/saban/iraq/index.pdf>

⁵ WFP and COSIT (2006, May) *Food Security and Vulnerable Analysis in Iraq*, (p26).

⁶ Campbell, J.H., O'hanlon, M.E. (2007, February 22). *Brookings Institution Iraq Index*, (p35).
<http://www.brookings.edu/fp/saban/iraq/index.pdf>

⁷ WFP and COSIT. (2006, May) *Food Security and Vulnerable Analysis in Iraq*, (p2).

⁸ WFP and COSIT (2006, May) *Food Security and Vulnerable Analysis in Iraq*, (p2).

⁹ UNDP and Iraqi Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation. (2005). *Iraq Living Conditions Survey 2004 Volume II: Analytical Report*, (p58).

¹⁰ UNDP and Iraqi Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation. (2006). *Unsatisfied Basic Needs Mapping and Living Standards in Iraq, Executive Summary*, (p 12).

¹¹ UNDP and Iraqi Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation. (2005). *Iraq Living Conditions Survey 2004 Volume II: Analytical Report*, (p42).

¹² WFP and COSIT (2006, May) *Food Security and Vulnerable Analysis in Iraq*, (p46).

¹³ UNDP and Iraqi Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation. (2006). *Unsatisfied Basic Needs Mapping and Living Standards in Iraq, Executive Summary*, (p 12).

¹⁴ Government of Iraq and UNICEF, *2007-2010 Country Programme Action Plan*, (p.5)

¹⁵ UNDP and Iraqi Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation. (2004). *Iraq Living Conditions Survey 2004 Volume II: Analytical Report*, (p83).

¹⁶ UNDP and Iraqi Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation. (2004). *Iraq Living Conditions Survey 2004 Volume II: Analytical Report*, (p83).

¹⁷ Campbell, J.H., O'hanlon, M.E. (2007, March 8). *Brookings Institution Iraq Index*, (p37).

<http://www.brookings.edu/fp/saban/iraq/index.pdf>

¹⁸ UN-HABITAT. (2006, November). *Iraq Housing Market Study*, (p5 and 8).

- **Iraqis unable to access basic services**

Millions of very poor Iraqis are food insecure and enduring poor or non-existent supplies of basic survival requirements: water, sanitation, food, shelter and health services. This is compounded by personal security, as they face increasing violence on a daily basis. Even those who have found temporary refuge are not guaranteed that the host community's ability to absorb and provide for their needs is sufficient and sustainable.

- **1.8 Million IDPs**

An estimated 2 million Iraqis are displaced inside Iraq, of which nearly **800,000** have become displaced just since February 2006.¹⁹ Prior to the 2003 US Invasion **1,024,000** Iraqis were already displaced and an additional **148,000** were displaced from 2003 to 2006.²⁰ Such a dramatic population shift in only 12 months was neither anticipated nor can it be easily supported for an indefinite period of time, due to ongoing violence and the steadily deteriorating living standards facing most Iraqis. This combination of unfortunate circumstances has resulted in dramatic humanitarian needs for IDPs and their host communities.

With populations remaining displaced for longer periods, the strain on infrastructure and services in impacted communities has become acute. In addition, tensions with host communities are rising, due in part to local price increases and competition over access to basic services, infrastructure and employment.

- **Refugees in Iraq**

There are more than **50,000** Palestinian, Syrian, and Iranian refugees in Iraq who have been targeted in deliberate discrimination and attacks by local communities.²¹ Like Iraqis, they are facing difficulties accessing basic services, shelter and protection, but this difficulty is compounded by their legal status within the country, and the fact that they have fewer options for safety.

- **Two Million Iraqis in Neighbouring Countries**

Almost two million Iraqis have fled Iraq and are taking refuge in neighbouring countries (mostly in Jordan and Syria)²² with an additional outflow of **40,000 to 50,000** thousand per month²³ as conditions continue to worsen. Iraqi asylum seekers in neighbouring countries often are unable to access the full range of social services. The international community must support these neighbouring countries to cope with the steady influx of Iraqis. In the interim, personal coping mechanisms and resources are being eroded, as they seek to find shelter and support in a foreign land. Unfortunately, the situation has led to newly arrived Iraqis, who are

often poorer than previous asylum-seekers, being blamed for overcrowding in schools, increased rates of crime, prostitution and real-estate prices, and shortages of food and commodities.²⁴

Those forced to flee their communities – whether internally or externally displaced – should be accorded basic protection and human rights, and provided with access to key social services to sustain their basic needs and to maintain their dignity. It is important to tackle the root causes of these displacements and to address their regional implications so that safe, voluntary and dignified returns can be possible.

- **Children**

The conflict is having a particularly profound impact on the physical and psychosocial well-being of children who are disproportionately affected by the lack of security, protection, and basic services. Malnutrition, school dropouts, and mental trauma are prevalent amongst Iraqi children, and these critical issues need to be addressed at the earliest opportunity.

- Internally displaced persons: 1,024,000 (prior to 2003), 148,000 (2003 to 2006), and 800,000 (2006 to present)
- Refugees in Iraq: 50,000
- Iraqis in neighbouring countries: 2 million
- Poverty: 54% of the population living below US\$1/day.
- Unemployment: over 25-40%
- Inflation: 70%
- Recorded civilian casualties in 2006: 34,452
- Recorded civilian injuries in 2006: 36,685
- Children under the age of 5 who suffer from malnutrition: 43%

3. Challenges to Humanitarian Response

UNCT and NGO humanitarian assistance to Iraq has so far averted a full-scale breakdown in basic social services. To date, major disease outbreaks have been avoided and health and education campaigns are being delivered to millions of citizens in partnership with Iraq's Government and civil society. Similarly, delivery of potable water, emergency food rations, medical supplies and non-food items have provided temporary relief to IDPs and vulnerable neighbourhoods. However, these gains are at risk without additional investment from the GoI, as well as the international humanitarian community, to ensure that Iraq's PDS, healthcare, education, and water and sanitation systems keep functioning.

GoI

The scope of the required humanitarian response appears to be beyond the GoI's immediate capacity, and therefore requires sufficient support from the humanitarian community to ensure an immediate response to Iraq's growing humanitarian needs.

¹⁹ UNHCR Iraq. (2007, February). *IDP report*, (p1).

²⁰ UNHCR Iraq. (2007, February). *IDP report*, (p1).

²¹ UNHCR Iraq. (2006, November). *Update on the Iraq Situation*, (p2).

²² UNHCR Iraq. (2006, November). *Update on the Iraq Situation*, (p2).

²³ UNHCR. (2007, March). *Humanitarian needs of persons displaced within Iraq and across the country's borders: an international response*, (p4).

²⁴ UNHCR. (2007, February 15). *Briefing on the Situation of Displaced Iraqis in Jordan and Syria*, (p2).

Lack of Humanitarian Space

Since the 2003 US Invasion at least 84 aid workers have been killed²⁵ and many have been kidnapped, arrested and injured. In order to deliver assistance, a conducive operational environment must be created. As the violence has escalated the humanitarian space has all but evaporated, catching the population in a double jeopardy: just as needs have spiralled assistance has all but been suspended from most sources. The UN's ability to effectively respond to the crisis has been compromised by the severely constrained humanitarian space and by security parameters, which have led to strong perceptions of lack of neutrality and impartiality of the UN in Iraq.

Remote Management

As a result of lack of humanitarian space, the UN has had to resort largely to remote management, with implementation through NGO partners, community structures, as well as governmental partners. Current operations are managed from Jordan and Kuwait, and any larger scale response could require additional regional presence. Modalities assumed for development activities can be adapted for delivery of aid, data gathering and implementation of projects. There is a need for greater centralisation of information management to ensure data consistency and credibility, and facilitate appropriate planning and monitoring of the response.

Appropriate Resources

Three years ago it was thought that Iraq was on the road to recovery and development. This was reflected in the creation and mandate of International Reconstruction Fund Facility for Iraq (IRFFI), which is primarily a development fund and, as such, not an appropriate or effective mechanism for funding humanitarian projects. Therefore, a separate rapid response funding mechanism is needed.

Iraq Perceived as a Wealthy Country

In the past, Iraq was a donor country itself, and it is largely perceived as a wealthy country. Donors therefore are reluctant to add funding for humanitarian assistance to the funds already allocated to Iraq, possibly preferring instead to channel resources to other humanitarian situations suffering from lack of funds. Regardless of what resources may be at the disposal of the GoI, it lacks the capacity to plan the programming of those resources to address the needs of its population. Therefore, the international humanitarian community requires donor investment in order to meet the immediate and overwhelming needs, in order to provide immediate relief to Iraqis, as well as to provide the necessary support to enhance the GoI's efforts.

Humanitarian Void Filled by Non-State Actors

Due to the overwhelming need of assistance and the inability of the GoI or the humanitarian community to meet it, armed groups and community leaders (political, religious and/or tribal) have begun to fill the void with their own form of social welfare. While

such initiatives address some of the immediate basic needs of parts of the population, albeit in a sectarian manner, they carry long term implications. In particular, assistance provided by armed groups may serve to increase their profile and influence among communities, thus further reducing the possibility for future neutral humanitarian space in Iraq.

Access and Security

While the UN appreciates the assistance the Multi-National Forces/Iraq (MNF-I) have provided for transportation and security inside Iraq, the UN cannot be perceived as neutral, as a result. Neutrality is essential for humanitarian operations, and therefore the UN needs to identify independent means of travel that meet security parameters, while affording the degree of access necessary for its activities.

4. Way Forward

The current UN country team (UNCT) has been providing assistance to the GoI and Iraqis since 2003, despite the constraints imposed by the situation. Working through its national staff members based inside Iraq, the UN has also established functional networks with national partners country-wide, making it possible to consider delivery of assistance in Iraq.

Operational Partnerships

Work is in progress to reinforce operational partnerships with the UNCT and NGOs through shared information management systems, increased coordination and strengthened partnership capacity. International and national NGOs continue to operate inside Iraq and are tested partners in the delivery of immediate humanitarian assistance. However, these NGOs need financial support if their presence and operations are to be maintained. It is also necessary for future assistance activities to identify local actors as a means to provide relief and humanitarian assistance to the most affected and vulnerable Iraqi populations.

The UN will continue to work with the GoI to jointly provide assistance to the most affected Iraqi populations. However, as the scope of the humanitarian crisis is beyond the current response capacity of the GoI, the UN will increase its current humanitarian activities to match the increasing needs where possible. To that end, the UN is committed to working directly with governorates, districts and community leaders, to ensure that interventions are tailored to the unique circumstances in each district.

On a regional level, the humanitarian crisis has implications in terms of outflow, security and access to vulnerable groups. Therefore neighbouring countries and their NGO communities should be engaged and included in determinations of responses. Humanitarian corridors between these countries need to be developed and preliminary discussions regarding coordination between sister UN agencies in these countries have begun.

²⁵ NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI). (2007, March). <http://www.ncciraq.org/>.

Information Hub

The humanitarian community must determine the number and location of the most affected Iraqis, to better target humanitarian assistance and plan for any possible further deterioration of the humanitarian situation. Similarly, as part of its advocacy responsibilities, it is important to have data that is as accurate as circumstances permit. Therefore, a centralised Information Hub will be created under the auspices of the Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq. It will be mandated to gather, process, and disseminate humanitarian data from all available and credible sources. In the following weeks, a consultative process will identify indicators that can be reliably monitored, and the resulting data will be analysed for trends. This information management mechanism will enable the UN to regularly disseminate information to all actors regarding the humanitarian situation in Iraq.

Advocacy

Finally but perhaps most importantly, the UN will create a humanitarian space in Iraq through targeted advocacy, aimed at various audiences, such as donors, governments, and the Iraqi people. It is critical that policy-makers, as well as those in need, understand what is being done, by whom, and with what support. In the coming weeks, the Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq will host an advocacy workshop for the UN and NGOs working in Iraq, in order to identify which audiences require what messages and to design the necessary delivery strategy. This strategy will be underpinned by the on-the-ground interventions, as well as mainstreamed through the UN's support to Iraq, both inside and outside the country.

5. Conclusion

Iraq is in crisis; Iraqis are suffering and their circumstances are deteriorating daily. The escalation of violence has severely constrained humanitarian space, with the result that suffering people are not heard, and their needs are not met. In order to avert the impending regional crisis, swift and appropriate action is needed from all.

Iraq's recovery process now depends upon ending a climate of disorder and impunity where rights violations are increasingly commonplace. The targeting of civilian populations by all parties to the conflict must cease. The GoI should be urged on a priority basis to take all necessary steps to fulfil its obligations under international humanitarian and human rights laws. The donor community is encouraged to re-evaluate its current focus on long-term reconstruction and development programmes, and to support efforts to address the crisis immediately, before more damage is done, and more lives are unnecessarily lost. The UN stands committed in its role as neutral broker to coordinate the humanitarian response so urgently needed.