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## Iraq: U.S. Response to Displacement Remains Inadequate

As the conflict in Iraq intensifies, it is no longer possible to ignore its devastating effects on Iraqi civilians. In January 2007 the UN finally recognized that the death of tens of thousands of Iraqis and the displacement of four million others in Iraq and the region constitute a humanitarian crisis.

This recognition represents a major step for the organization which until then had been working under the assumption that the situation in Iraq was conducive to reconstruction and development.

As the displacement of Iraqis continues to increase dramatically, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has taken the lead in sensitizing its UN sister agencies and its donors to the deteriorating humanitarian situation of displaced Iraqis. On April 17th and 18th 2007, UNHCR organized in Geneva an international conference of State parties, UN agencies and NGOs to highlight the growing problem of Iraqi displacement and its regional ramifications. Although other countries announced some positive steps at the conference, the response of the United States remained insufficient and inadequate. The U.S. needs to increase dramatically its response to the Iraqi displacement and humanitarian crisis now.

With the vast majority of Iraqi refugees in Jordan and Syria, and sizeable populations in Lebanon, Iran, Turkey and Egypt, the crisis has become regional. Countries of asylum are feeling the strain caused by these large influxes, and many have started imposing drastic restrictions on their entry requirements, with some even deporting Iraqis back to Iraq. Syria hosts more than one million Iraqis, and Jordan more than 700,000. The burden posed by these large numbers of people is enormous. Hospitals and schools are overcrowded, and prices for food, oil and rent have increased dramatically since 2004. Economies could collapse and political unrest could arise if Jordan and Syria in particular do not receive help now.

According to its representative to the UNHCR conference, Jordan is paying at least a billion dollars a year to cope with the Iraqi refugee crisis. Similarly, the Syrian representative emphasized the hundreds of millions of dollars in direct aid the Syrian government has provided Iraqi refugees, without even including the cost of daily subsidies resulting from the government's inclusion of more than one million extra beneficiaries in its centralized welfare system. In this context, UNHCR's main goal for the conference was to emphasize the necessity for members of the international community to share the burden with the region.

Yet even after listening to harrowing statistics and concerns from regional countries, the U.S. representative to the conference, Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs Paula Dobriansky, stated that the U.S. would contribute \$100 million to respond to the Iraqi displacement crisis, including programs both inside and outside the country. This represents a mere fraction of the amounts being spent by much poorer neighboring countries.

Iraqis who are internally displaced are in an even more precarious situation than refugees. Indeed, as borders close, Iraqis are forced to flee for safety within Iraq, many of them trying to reach safer areas in the north or the south. With the number of safe areas within Iraq decreasing every day, vulnerable civilians have fewer and fewer places to flee. Moreover, certain governorates, like Kerbala and Basra, have closed their internal borders, as they are overwhelmed with newcomers. Others, like the Kurdish northern ones, have imposed severe restrictions on their borders as to who can enter in the North.

International assistance is scarce in Iraq. Until now, the UN has not provided an appropriate response, both for political and security reasons. As for the U.S., the Administration is planning to spend a mere 17 million dollars in assistance for Iraqi internally displaced people --- a little more than three dollars per person per year, which could end up being even less, as the number of displaced continue to rise by 50,000 people a month.

Refugees International has called on the Iraqi government to respond to the needs of its people. Indeed, it is the Iraqi government that is primarily responsible for addressing the needs of the internally displaced, and until now, it has failed to do so in a comprehensive manner. RI welcomes, however, the initiatives taken by Iraq in light of the Geneva conference. During the conference, the Iraqi Foreign Minister announced that not only would the Iraqi government increase assistance to the internally displaced, it also plans to open offices in Syria and Jordan and will provide these countries with a \$25 million budget to cater to the needs of Iraqi refugees there.

Since October 2006 the U.S. government has gone from denying that large numbers of vulnerable Iraqi refugees even existed to speaking openly of an "Iraqi refugee crisis." But its actual financial commitments are commensurate neither with the need nor with the U.S. role in creating the displacement crisis in the first place. The President and his war cabinet have yet to recognize the human toll the violence has been taking on Iraqi civilians and neighboring countries. The \$100 million contribution announced by Under Secretary Dobriansky includes amounts that have already been disbursed and therefore does not represent a significant new U.S. effort to do its part. Moreover, this amount will prove far short of a fair share for the U.S. as numbers and needs continue to grow.

The United States must show the world that it is taking this matter seriously and willing to set a positive example for the international community's efforts in the region. Refugees International recommends that the U.S. triple its budget for response to internal displacement and commit \$200-250 million in new money to respond to the needs of Iraqi refugees through UN and other multilateral agencies and direct assistance to governments in the region. Failure to respond at this level will have dramatic consequences for Iraqis and for regional and global stability.

Although assistance to the region is the overarching priority, resettlement of the most vulnerable Iraqis is a key component of the international response to the crisis. From 2003 to early 2007, the U.S. resettled only 466 Iraqis. At the end of 2006, the U.S. Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration (BRPM) announced that the U.S. would resettle

7,000 Iraqis in 2007. At the Geneva conference, Assistant Secretary Sauerbrey stated that this number could reach 25,000 provided UNHCR referred these cases to the U.S. But by refusing to have American embassies handle referrals themselves, the State Department forced UNHCR to bear the entire burden of the resettlement operation, and put the under-resourced and under-staffed agency in a difficult position.

Nonetheless, at the beginning of May 2007, UNHCR had managed to refer almost 3,000 cases to the U.S. in 2007 alone, and was actually ahead of its schedule for referrals for the year. Of these referrals, at the same date, the U.S. had resettled a total of 68. Moreover, although the U.S. announced plans to set up mechanisms to process Iraqi refugees targeted because of their affiliation with the U.S., nothing has been established yet, except for an email address that refugees can send their information to. With the State Department blaming the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) for these delays, and DHS responding that BRPM has not communicated their needs to them, it is unclear whose responsibility it is to get the process moving.

#### **REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:**

- ❑ President Bush and Secretary Rice publicly acknowledge the extent of the Iraqi displacement crisis, as well as the toll it is taking on the region;
- ❑ The U.S. Congress appropriate for FY2008 a substantial increase in funds, totaling at least several hundred million dollars, for multilateral and bilateral assistance to Iraq and countries hosting Iraqis;
- ❑ The U.S. Congress appropriate funds for resettlement of Iraqis;
- ❑ The State Department train its embassy staff in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Egypt to process resettlement cases to deal with the caseload of Iraqis who had to flee because of their affiliation to the U.S.;
- ❑ The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration and the Department of Homeland Security devise and put in place the systems they need to promptly process a large number of resettlement cases to the U.S.

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