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Iraqi Refugee Crisis: International Response Urgently Needed

With the violence in Iraq showing no sign of slowing down, civilians increasingly suffer. More than two million Iraqis have fled their homes, and the exodus is accelerating. By November 2006, an estimated 1.8 million Iraqis had already sought shelter in neighboring countries, while at least 500,000 more had been displaced within Iraq since 2003. Middle Eastern countries, Syria and Jordan in particular, have shown great generosity in welcoming Iraqis in the past three years, but that welcome is wearing thin. Tensions are rising as refugees overburden public services. Host countries urgently need international assistance. In particular, the United Nations and its refugee agency must dramatically increase resources and operations in Syria and Jordan.

Generalized Violence Drives up Refugee Numbers

Everybody is a potential target in Iraq. Refugees International met with dozens of Iraqi families of all faiths and backgrounds who had been targeted for different reasons: their religion, economic status, ethnicity or profession. As a result, Iraqis are seeking refuge throughout the Middle East. Syria and Jordan have absorbed more than 700,000 each and hundreds of thousands more are in Egypt, Turkey, Kuwait and Iran. More than 40,000 Iraqis are arriving in Syria each month, and numbers are likely similar for Jordan.

Syrian Response

For the time being, Syria is maintaining its “open door policy” to Iraqi refugees in the name of pan-Arabism. In addition to the influx of Iraqi refugees, Syria is home to 450,000 Palestinians, and has also provided assistance and temporary shelter to hundreds of thousands of Lebanese civilians fleeing the bombings during the recent Israel-Lebanon conflict. Syria’s resources are stretched thin. Before 2005, Iraqis had access to the same public services as Syrians. In the face of the growing Iraqi population, Syria started imposing restrictions on Iraqi refugees; it now charges for healthcare that used to be free. Similarly, until recently Iraqis were issued six-month visas. Recent policy changes now limit Iraqis to a three-month visa, and force them to undertake expensive trips to exit the country and renew their visas.

Lebanese and Jordanian Response

In Lebanon and Jordan, the situation is even more difficult for Iraqis. Both countries are now showing a

diminishing tolerance for Iraqi presence. In Lebanon, which hosts about 40,000 Iraqis, refugees are increasingly arrested for illegal presence, imprisoned and forced to choose between remaining in prison and being deported. While Lebanon has closed its borders to Iraqis entirely, Jordan continues to let Iraqis in, albeit selectively. Unlike in Syria, Iraqis have to pay for all services and live in constant fear of deportation. The Jordanian government, concerned about the risk of instability, has shut its border to young men, forcing families to separate. Visas are issued on a sporadic basis, and while many Iraqis reported receiving a standard three-month visa, there were growing reports, many documented by RI, that border officials are issuing transit visas – many as short as two days – to Iraqis. As a result, Iraqis are quickly falling out of status and are subject to potential deportation.

International Response

Iraq’s neighbors are overwhelmed by the scope of the crisis. While many diplomatic missions in both Syria and Jordan are now concerned by the increasing numbers of Iraqis seeking shelter, they feel that the US, given its role in Iraq, should lead humanitarian efforts in the surrounding countries. However, the US has responded minimally to the refugee flow. With services already stretched thin or denied outright to Iraqis, host governments need international support to help meet Iraqis’ basic needs. International leadership is needed to develop a coherent regional burden sharing plan, and international resources must allow host countries to finance the basic needs of Iraqi refugees on their territory.

United Nations Response

Lebanon, Syria and Jordan are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention, and work with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) under Memoranda of Understanding that bind the agency to resettle every person it declares a refugee. Those who are not resettled within one year face either prison detention or deportation to their home country. With few countries willing to resettle Iraqis – less than 1,500 have been resettled since 2003, and 50 percent of the cases submitted by UNHCR are rejected – UNHCR has been forced to limit Refugee Status Determination interviews to only the most vulnerable cases. Ironically, since UNHCR lacks the resources to register refugees, host countries are able to downplay the extent of the crisis, routinely noting that UNHCR has only 20,000 registered cases in Syria and 39,000 in Jordan. UNHCR has created a regime of temporary protection to provide some status for Iraqi refugees in the Middle East. Unrecognized by national laws however, this regime, designed to protect Iraqis from deportation back to Iraq, has little impact in reality, especially in Lebanon and Jordan.

Lack of resources further keeps UNHCR from being able to monitor influxes and assist the most vulnerable. With bare-bones teams in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, UNHCR cannot register incoming refugees at border crossings. Studies conducted by the UN and international agencies in Lebanon and Syria have shown that vulnerable Iraqis in both countries are in dire need of assistance on several levels. Although there is no official study for Jordan yet, needs documented by Refugees International are similar. Access to healthcare and education is a major issue, as are mental health and legal assistance needs. Extremely limited in its means, UNHCR can only provide the bare minimum for a small minority of the needy. UNHCR's budget in Syria this year is just \$700,000, less than one dollar per refugee. UNHCR needs resources to help Iraqi refugees, and it also needs food, medicine and other help from other UN agencies. UNHCR is the only UN agency assisting Iraqis in Lebanon and Jordan, while UNICEF and other agencies voice interest but provide little support in Syria. Given the growing impact of this crisis, UNHCR, as the lead agency for refugees, needs the technical support and expertise of its sister agencies.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ The US and international community acknowledge the scope of the crisis and provide assistance directly or indirectly to regional governments to help them absorb refugees and keep their borders open;
- ❑ Nations hosting Iraqi refugees recognize their needs, and work proactively with UNHCR and others to provide necessary services to Iraqi refugees;
- ❑ The UN help create a regional burden-sharing plan that includes all countries neighboring Iraq and obtains commitments from donors to provide resources to these countries;
- ❑ International donors increase substantially their support to UNHCR and fully meet their appeal for 2007;
- ❑ UNHCR and national governments devise alternatives to the temporary protection regime;
- ❑ Host countries work with the UN to increase the capacity of national health, education, and housing systems to provide adequate services for Iraqi refugees, including plans for international support for these services;
- ❑ Other UN agencies participate in relief efforts for Iraqis. The UN country teams need to make humanitarian response for Iraqis a priority in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan.

Advocates Kristele Younes and Sean Garcia recently completed a three-week assessment mission to Lebanon, Syria and Jordan.