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IRAQI REFUGEES: WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND SECURITY CRITICAL TO RETURNS

The Iraqi refugee crisis is far from over and recent violence is creating further displacement. Iraqi women will resist returning home, even if conditions improve in Iraq, if there is no focus on securing their rights as women and assuring their personal security and their families' well being. Reducing support to displaced families could force returns to insecure areas without adequate services and trigger additional instability in Iraq. Budget cuts will hit women the hardest. The U.S. and other donor governments should avoid shifting funds into returns programs without fully funding programs for the displaced.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND THE RELUCTANCE TO RETURN

Very few displaced people in northern Iraq and Syria are willing to return in the foreseeable future. 81,000 internally displaced Iraqis returned as of May 2009, but these returns were often not sustainable. Refugees International interviewed families in northern Iraq who had returned to their home areas, but had been displaced again. Only 900 of the 208,030 refugees registered with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Syria signed up for voluntary return this year. UNHCR in Damascus currently registers around 2,000 new Iraqi refugees every month. It is clear that large-scale returns are not going to happen in the near future given the current uncertainties in Iraq.

Not one woman interviewed by RI indicated her intention to return. Some women said they won't return because they are members of targeted minority groups, or because of injuries they suffered. Many widows told RI that they fear returning to homes where their husbands were killed, and where they now have no means of economic survival. Some fear rising conservatism would restrict their ability to participate in civic and professional life. Women seeking to resume their former roles and lifestyles in high profile professions, such as journalists or doctors, believe current circumstances in Iraq put them at risk. Others feared they

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The U.S. and the UN should urge the Government of Iraq to improve its laws and police and judicial structures that relate to violence against women.
- The U.S. should urge the Government of Iraq to continue its registration of IDPs and allocate sufficient resources to fully fund financial assistance and services to them.
- The U.S. and other donors should fund and provide technical assistance on prevention and response to violence against women for the KRG Ministry of Interior, shelter providers, and local NGOs.
- The UN and donor governments should further engage Syria to increase legal security for vulnerable families by providing them with longer residence permits, while UNHCR should collaborate with Syria to find individual solutions for families unable to return.
- UNHCR should provide better resettlement counseling to refugees, particularly outside of Damascus, and expedite urgent security cases.

were at risk of so called “honor killings” by family members because they refused marriages, had divorced, or were accused of prostitution.

RI learned of situations where men decided to return but their wives refused. UNHCR protection workers reported that this is often because the women did not tell their husbands about sexual abuse during kidnappings or when their husbands were missing. Others feared kidnappings or murders of surviving children, particularly their sons. A displaced woman living in a tent in very poor conditions in northern Iraq told RI, “This tent is more comfortable than a palace in Baghdad; my family is safe here.”

WOMEN’S VULNERABILITY AND FINANCIAL AND LEGAL INSECURITY

In both the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Syria, extreme financial pressures on displaced families are resulting in increased reports of forced early marriages, “temporary marriages” (*muta*), prostitution, and trafficking of women and girls. The U.S. should fund at least 50% of the UN’s regional appeal for Iraq to provide assistance and services that reduce the vulnerability of displaced women.

In Syria, refugees cannot legally work, and risk deportation if discovered. Most refugees who arrived with resources have now exhausted them during their years of exile. Many men are unemployed and frustrated, their families forced into exploitative illegal work conditions and poorer housing given the rising cost of living. Continually having to seek extensions of residence permits, which may not be granted, adds to the stress on families. Increasing domestic violence is one result. Community center workers said more women are reporting domestic violence, and more women come into the centers covered in bruises.

Refugee women are deterred from seeking police protection because of their uncertain legal status and fears of deportation. RI learned of an Iraqi woman working as a singer in a restaurant who was attacked by three men and raped. When she reported the crime to the police and asked for assistance, she was arrested, detained for six days, and threatened with deportation for working illegally. UNHCR finally obtained her release, but her assailants were never arrested.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO PREVENT DESTITUTION AND ABUSE

Much of the abuse and exploitation of women reported to RI was linked to desperate economic problems, which could be reduced by greater financial support to families at risk. Female employment levels are low — only 18% in Iraq.

Many women who had jobs lost them when they had to flee. Those who depended on the incomes of men who have been killed, gone missing or become disabled have few skills or opportunities to earn money and now ask for training to build their skills.

In the KRG, RI met with displaced women whose only means of economic survival was begging; others depended on charity. Few women interviewed by RI in the KRG had managed to successfully navigate the complex bureaucracy involved in claiming their widow’s pension, obtaining their internally displaced person’s (IDP) stipend, or in transferring their Public Distribution System (PDS) card to give them monthly access to food. Nor have they been able to obtain the necessary documents needed to reclaim property or compensation for its destruction in Iraq. People who had returned and been displaced again told RI that they had not received the government return allowance.

While most internally displaced people interviewed commended the KRG for its hospitality and security, very few displaced people had received their IDP stipend. The KRG Directorate of Migration and Displacement said they received insufficient funds from the Government of Iraq to cover this. Fixing Iraq’s safety net for the survivors of violence and conflict should be a priority.

The Government of Iraq’s announcements of its intention to “close the IDP file” by the end of 2009 have fueled anxiety that already inadequate levels of assistance would disappear. According to the UN World Food Program (WFP), female-headed households are the most food insecure group in Iraq. UNHCR reports that only about 10% of the internally displaced in KRG have managed to transfer their PDS card to their new temporary residence. Some women lost access to PDS due to non-registration of divorces or marriage. To prevent hunger and illness, WFP is seeking \$90 million to continue distribution of emergency half-rations to destitute IDP families not receiving PDS.

In Syria, UNHCR is currently providing needs-based cash assistance (\$113 per month plus \$10 for additional family members to a maximum of \$200) via bank cards to only 11,500 of the most vulnerable registered families, while recognizing that at least 18,000 families need such assistance. Increased rents and rising prices mean the stipend only covers part of the rent. Since half of its 2009 budget is unfunded, UNHCR fears having to cut rather than expand this program.

By necessity UNHCR limits cash assistance to certain vulnerable people (such as large families, female-headed households, elderly or disabled). The current criteria need revision, however. As soon as a family’s able-bodied son turns 18, the family usually loses its assistance, even though

the son cannot work legally. This type of provision forces people into illegal --- and at times dangerous and exploitative --- work conditions. RI was told that wages of less than \$50 for 70 hours of work were typical. UNHCR prioritizes aid to female-headed households, but this has had some perverse effects. For financial survival, some couples have divorced, creating new protection problems for the women. RI met women forced to undertake dangerous journeys to Iraq for divorce documentation needed to qualify for cash assistance.

WFP provides food bi-monthly to almost all registered Iraqi refugees and UNHCR adds commodities. Most refugees interviewed would prefer cash to be able to choose the quality and quantities of food; some told RI that they sold their rations for as little as \$5 to \$6. A Joint UN Assessment Mission is being conducted to re-assess and hopefully re-design the program. RI is concerned that the 5,000 recognized non-Iraqi refugees in Syria do not receive the same levels of assistance.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

In northern Iraq, the KRG has taken some welcome steps to respond to the disturbingly high levels of reported gender-based violence (GBV), particularly so-called “honor killings,” burnings and other attacks on women, often disguised as accidents or suicides. Recent higher GBV statistics in KRG may indicate a greater willingness to report such crimes, but further visible government support for women’s rights is sorely needed throughout Iraq.

The KRG, unlike the Government of Iraq, has suspended laws providing for “mitigating circumstances” to reduce the punishments for so-called “honor” crimes and has increased the penalties. Its Prime Minister set up a Cabinet-level Committee on Violence against Women and set up and staffed in each KRG governorate a “Directorate to Follow up Violence against Women.” The offices conduct outreach and public education and investigate cases to turn over to the prosecutor. To protect women at risk of serious violence, the KRG and nongovernmental organizations operate small residential shelters. However, staff has little training or experience on security, confidentiality, or the counseling skills needed to assist clients. RI learned of recent incidents of women being trafficked from shelters.

The KRG could enhance these institutions’ effectiveness and credibility by appointing experienced women to senior leadership posts in the Cabinet Committee and the Directorates, by regulating the shelters, and by ensuring shelter staff receive training and oversight. Donors should provide technical assistance through deploying specialists in investigations, witness protection, counseling, and helping to

create standard operating procedures for temporary shelters. Donors should increase support to local NGOs experienced in GBV prevention and response services. Help is also needed in ensuring the wider distribution of public education materials in both Kurdish and Arabic, since higher levels of domestic violence are reported in the displaced population, which has not benefitted from any government outreach.

The U.S., particularly the State Department and the Ambassador for Global Women’s Issues, and the UN should urge the Government of Iraq to reform its laws on violence against women, particularly the sections of the 1969 Iraqi Penal Code and the Revolutionary Command Council orders that provide reduced or no punishments for violence against women. This would send a message that Iraq is now taking these issues seriously. Public education measures on the rights of women should be undertaken with the involvement of religious leaders. Government services to prevent, investigate and respond to violence against women must be improved to ensure that those responsible for such crimes are brought to justice and receive penalties that match the severity of the crime.

ACCESS TO PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Doctors confirmed that many Iraqis have high levels of chronic diseases, complicated by the psycho-social stresses of war and displacement. The KRG has insufficient public medical care for internally displaced people who have experienced trauma. The national government is not distributing medical resources, including medicines, according to current demographics in the region. Displaced women are disproportionately affected since gynecological, preventive and mental health services are particularly weak. The UN Population Fund’s (UNFPA) current focus is not on internally displaced people.

The Government of Iraq and humanitarian organizations are encouraging greater use of local Public Health Centers (PHCs), but doctors and patients complained in particular that PHCs have unhygienic conditions and lack medicines, well-trained staff and privacy for women giving birth. Post-rape kits and HIV tests are unavailable in most KRG hospitals and PHCs. The displaced, like many Iraqis, prefer specialized care from private physicians or hospitals. The UN and donors should increase efforts to make PHCs more sensitive to women’s physical and mental health needs.

In the KRG and Syria increased mental health services are needed to respond to the serious traumas that women and children suffered in Iraq, often complicated by the uncertainties of displacement and family separations. Psychiatric

or psychological services are needed for some; for others, attending a rehabilitation/community center that provides skills training and self-reliance programs can help overcome social isolation, provide psychosocial support, and create opportunities for greater independence. Traditionally women from more conservative areas of Iraq have lived lives centered on their homes; many were illiterate. When their communities were still intact, they interacted with extended families and friends. In displacement, they are socially isolated. Some never go out of their homes; some know no neighbors or friends. Outreach programs, particularly those staffed by displaced Iraqis, must be an essential component of effective service provision for urban IDPs and refugees.

RI urges the UN and donors to increase support for legal assistance centers and outreach services to reach women to enable them to deal with pressing health, legal and social issues. In the KRG, UNHCR is developing NGO-staffed Protection and Assistance Centers with GBV programs. These programs help women overcome their isolation and encourage the formation of self-help groups, while providing legal assistance and information on available services. But such services are overstretched, reaching only a small percentage of those who need them, and the UN's security rules continue to hamper UNHCR's ability to coordinate and lead the protection sector.

In Syria, donors are supporting innovative new rehabilitation/counseling community centers, staffed by Syrian Arab Red Crescent volunteers with the support of various international NGOs. These programs help some of the most vulnerable Iraqis and their Syrian neighbors to integrate socially, overcome fears, and deal with pressing family problems. They can access education and skills development, and experience safe structured recreation, particularly for at risk children and adults. One Iraqi woman told RI, "In Iraq our children saw dead bodies on the way to school...my son was kidnapped and it greatly affected my daughters...I keep them at home with me, but they need help...that's why I come to the center."

The Centers located in refugee neighborhoods provide free services, including referrals for those needing more intensive psychological or medical services. Many refugees are waiting for underfunded community center and rehabilitation services, including UNFPA's proposed GBV rehabilitation center. An Iraqi refugee woman volunteer teaching English at a community center told RI, "It was like I was in jail before – I had nothing to do, nowhere to go. Now I feel useful."

EDUCATION FOR DISPLACED CHILDREN

In the KRG, Arabic-language schools were already overcrowded before large numbers of Arabic-speaking internally displaced people arrived. More Arabic-language classrooms and textbooks are needed, as well as Kurdish language instruction. Many families sacrifice significant resources to transport and equip their children to attend school. But many IDP families are unable to afford the transportation costs to an Arabic-language school. Some internally displaced attend Kurdish-language schools, but without Kurdish language support, many failed or became discouraged and dropped out. Some of the displaced are forced to pick one child to educate and expect the others to work to support the family.

Syria generously opened its public schools and health care to all Iraqis. In 2008, the Ministry of Education reported Iraqi primary and secondary school registration dropped from 50,000 to 35,000. While a few returned to Iraq, many families reported needing children to leave school to work. Others blamed falling enrollment on overcrowding, the different Syrian curriculum, lost years of education, high incidental costs, no documentation for proper student placement, and students' discomfort with more prosperous classmates.

The UN and donors are funding some informal education programs and vocational training for youths who dropped out. Parents urged that these programs be expanded. Families noted difficulties convincing children to complete free secondary education since they could not go on to college given the fees required. UNHCR has a small college scholarship program, but its future is uncertain.

Parents and NGOs agreed that more remedial classes were needed both in the KRG and Syria for children to catch up for years of lost schooling while helping women become literate. Some feared Iraq would otherwise lose a generation of potential leaders.

INFORMATION ON RESETTLEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

UNHCR has identified and referred 70,000 vulnerable refugees needing resettlement. To date, 25,000 have been resettled. RI urges countries to continue to resettle the most vulnerable, but recommends that persons facing security threats be moved immediately, and not left in a queue. With limited places, recipient countries and the UN should provide better information about resettlement requirements and program operations, particularly outside the major cities.

Melanie Teff and Dawn Calabia assessed the situation for Iraqi women in northern Iraq and Syria in June 2009.