

March 17, 2010

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IRAQ:

HUMANITARIAN NEEDS PERSIST

The humanitarian situation facing Iraqi refugees and internally displaced people is quickly becoming a protracted one for which the U.S. bears special responsibility. Though the country is well positioned to generate vast sums of revenue from its oil, it will take many years before the government is able to rebuild the country's infrastructure and provide basic services to its people. Ongoing political and security concerns continue to challenge development efforts. It is thus critical that the U.S. and other donors continue to support a strong and expanded humanitarian program, working hand-in-hand with a variety of community development initiatives.

IRAQIS LIVING AS SQUATTERS IN SLUMS

UNHCR estimates that of the 1.5 million internally displaced people (IDPs) forced from their homes in 2006 and 2007, 33% or 500,000 live as squatters in slum areas. Refugees International visited about 20 different squatter settlements in various parts of Baghdad, Diyala, and Salah al-Din. These people have no legal title to the land. Many fear returning to their original homes. Most are too poor to relocate. The settlements all lack basic services, including water, sanitation, and electricity and are built in precarious places—under bridges, alongside railroad tracks, and amongst garbage dumps. In 2009 the Iraqi Government issued a directive calling upon all squatters to vacate public buildings. This directive has since been postponed, but they all remain at risk of eviction. UNHCR will have to liaise closely with other UN agencies and international and national NGOs to provide assistance to these communities and to urge the Government of Iraq to create programs of land grants and housing for these people.

Refugees International met several Iraqis who left Syria, because they could no longer afford to live there, and are now living as internally displaced squatters in these slum areas. As one squatter told the RI team, "We used to own a home in Abu Ghraib. Now we have lost everything. It is too

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The U.S. should continue to fund current and future UN appeals at no less than 50% and seek to dramatically increase its support for community development programs.
- The UN and the U.S. should review and adapt their security measures in Iraq to allow staff greater freedom of movement and access to vulnerable communities.
- The Government of Iraq should develop a detailed plan to implement the solutions included in its 2008 National Policy on Displacement.
- UNHCR should dramatically and rapidly increase its number of staff working in the field inside Iraq.
- The U.S. and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) should urge the Government of Iraq to create a process for IDPs to voluntarily integrate into the local communities in which they have been displaced.
- UNHCR should conduct a thorough needs assessment of the Palestinian refugee community in Iraq and seek durable solutions for those living in Iraq and Syria, including third country resettlement.

dangerous for us to return there, so we are living here, hoping that the government will give us a small piece of land.”

These families are among the most vulnerable in Iraq. Most have not received assistance from the government, UN agencies, or NGOs. Since they live illegally, the government is reluctant to improve their living conditions and address their basic needs. UNHCR is aware of many of these squatter settlements and is in the process of conducting a more comprehensive survey of them. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) also has a list of the settlements in which the internally displaced live. IOM and UNHCR should work together to develop a single, comprehensive list so that humanitarian interventions can be targeted and coordinated.

If UNHCR is going to have any impact addressing the needs of these especially vulnerable displaced people and the larger communities, they will have to dramatically increase the number of UNHCR staff people with the responsibility of reaching out to them. For those at risk of eviction in the near future, the UN should work closely with the Government of Iraq to begin to devise a contingency plan. As outlined in Iraq’s July 2008 National Policy on Displacement, displaced people and host communities should be involved in planning, designing and implementing appropriate strategies and programs concerning their return, integration or relocation.

INCREASING HUMANITARIAN ACCESS IN IRAQ

On the one hand the U.S., the UN, and the entire international community often champion the considerable security progress inside Iraq. On the other hand, these same entities continue to be extremely constrained by highly restrictive security protocols. These protocols no longer reflect the realities in the country, and the lack of access continues to severely hamper the humanitarian response of the UN and the U.S. The zero-risk mentality of the burgeoning security industry has hijacked more rational and creative thinking that might help guarantee staff safety while allowing for greater mobility in a more low-profile manner.

The UN Department for Safety and Security and the Resident Security Officers for the U.S. must adapt their security protocols to the new and changing realities and allow greater access for humanitarian workers. The northern and southern governorates of Iraq are widely recognized as being safe. Many parts of the central governorates can also be accessed daily for field visits. Refugees International staff was able to travel alone without security escorts throughout

most of Baghdad and multiple locations within Diyala, Salah al-Din and Babel. Iraqis of all types and backgrounds interviewed by Refugees International expressed a strong desire to see the UN and international actors return and fully function in the country.

Currently the U.S. government and the UN are completely dependent upon the U.S. military to provide access outside of the international zone. Access to Iraqi communities occurs irregularly and in a very limited fashion. Plans have to be made months in advance to coordinate trips. This already limited access will be further reduced with the impending U.S. military withdrawal.

Furthermore, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), led by the Department of Political Affairs (DPA), often does not prioritize humanitarian issues. They tend to take a back seat to UNAMI’s political agenda. Political affairs officials are often given priority over humanitarian actors when it comes to dividing the limited number of slots available for staff to travel outside of the international zone.

While international UN staff and diplomatic missions have limited access to Iraqi communities, an increasing number of international NGOs are accessing vulnerable Iraqis in Baghdad and other parts of the country. There is also a plethora of Iraqi NGOs who are making significant humanitarian contributions, without which much of the work could not take place. UNHCR’s efforts to enhance the capacity of over 100 national NGOs should be supported.

RETURNS AND THE PROSPECTS FOR LOCAL INTEGRATION

Though the Government of Iraq, the U.S., and other governments continue to push for displaced people to return home, much of the current displacement is likely to be permanent. UNHCR estimates that only 426,000 people have returned, the overwhelming majority of whom were internally displaced people. People will continue to return home, but only at a trickle. Lack of security and jobs continues to be a strong deterrent. Others are simply too traumatized to return to their places of origin. Long-term solutions must be found for these people.

If given the option, IOM estimates that 25% of IDPs would be interested in local integration. This would be an important step forward in the protection of some IDPs, as they would then presumably be granted residency cards reflecting their new place of habitual residence. Such cards would

allow them full and fair access to all services at the local and governorate level. They would be able to vote like other Iraqis in future elections, attend schools without facing discrimination, and seek employment without impediments. The U.S. and international community should urge the Government of Iraq to create a process for IDPs to voluntarily integrate locally if they so choose.

Those wishing to return to their original homes and lands, but who are unwilling or unable to do so at this time, should continue to be afforded this opportunity when the conditions warrant safe and voluntary returns. Efforts to ensure that such people are able to retrieve their properties should continue to be made. This includes urging the Government of Iraq to expand its property restitution mechanism to all of the governorates and to ensure that those displaced between 2003 and 2005 are also provided a mechanism to reclaim or be compensated for their lost properties. The Iraqi government should at least quadruple the \$850 return compensation grant currently available.

Although few people have returned home, the Government of Iraq, the UN, and several donors have supported a successful return and reintegration program in the Governorate of Diyala, a place that suffered some of the most severe violence and the displacement of some 300,000 individuals. The objective is to support the voluntary return and reintegration of at least 27,500 families while rebuilding their communities. Assistance has been provided to both returnees and local residents in the understanding that communities as a whole must be engaged if resentments are to be avoided and returns sustained. Targeting some 400 largely destroyed villages, the project aims to provide urgent life-saving services and rebuild homes, infrastructure, and livelihoods.

The Government of Iraq has pledged some \$78 million dollars for reconstruction of destroyed homes, but the disbursement of these funds is lagging. Despite this, 3,000 starter homes have been constructed with 6,000 more planned for 2010 if funding is made available.

The success of this initiative stems in part from the strong political commitment and financial pledge from the central government, the coordination and participation of most of the UN agencies and many international and national NGOs, and the strong support of the local authorities and communities. It is also successful because humanitarian actors are able to work closely with development actors, ensuring that the returns and the rebuilding of communities are long-term and sustainable. When Refugees International visited

the project in villages near Khan Bani Saad, it was a rare but positive example of long-term development efforts working hand-in-hand with humanitarian intervention, benefitting a much larger number of people than those directly targeted for assistance. This model is successful and could be replicated in other parts of Iraq, but it is very costly. Donors should be willing to support these efforts.

PROTECTING REFUGEES IN SYRIA

Most Iraqi refugees in Syria have benefited from generous government policies and hospitable neighbors. The government's recent efforts to extend residency permits for six months, their commitment to issue some work permits, and their engagement in drafting legislation that will address the presence of Iraqis in Syria are all positive steps that help to advance the protection of refugees.

Still, the overall situation for Iraqi refugees continues to deteriorate. It is therefore essential that the U.S. and other donors maintain their humanitarian commitment to this increasingly protracted refugee caseload. There are approximately 3,000 new individuals registering for refugee status each month. Most are unable to work. Families continue to be torn apart as men seek employment opportunities outside of Syria. Rents continue to increase. Families are forced to move in together and share small apartments. This year there are 30% fewer Iraqi children enrolled in school. In some cases the costs of books and school uniforms are prohibitive for families. There has been an increase in detention and deportation, due in part to petty crime and prostitution. Opportunities for local integration have not materialized, and the majority of refugees have no plans to return. While most refugees dream of third country resettlement, this solution will not be afforded to most of the 218,000 refugees currently registered with UNHCR.

Almost 13,000 vulnerable Iraqi families now receive cash assistance in the amount of approximately \$150 every month (plus \$15 per dependent) through the use of ATM cards. This creative program is efficient, effective and dignified—and a preferred form of assistance for most refugees. The ATM card system has an overhead of approximately 2.3%, whereas the overhead cost for assistance distributed through partner agencies can be as high as 23%. In urban contexts like Damascus, cash assistance cuts down on otherwise costly outreach and distribution efforts. Without more funding, UNHCR will be forced to scale back this life-saving program.

Similarly, refugees with chronic but treatable illnesses like diabetes and cancer are at risk of losing UNHCR's support due to funding shortfalls. Thousands of refugees' lives will be at stake if UNHCR and its partners are no longer able to help subsidize tertiary health care.

The World Food Program has also responded to the particular needs of delivering assistance in an urban environment through a recently introduced pilot program. Each family receives a SMS text message on his or her mobile phone with the voucher number and the amount of the entitlement. Families are then able to redeem the voucher for food from a list of nine items in any one of the selected stores participating in the program. Such a program directly benefits the local and national economy and supports Syrian-run markets. Refugees feel empowered to make their own food selections. Overhead costs are drastically reduced. This innovative model should be expanded in Syria and replicated in other parts of the world.

While these two innovative programs should be strengthened, more emphasis needs to be placed on skills training so that refugees are able to become self-sufficient. Information technology programs are particularly useful, as they have utility in resettlement countries, the country of asylum, and the country of origin.

Today, UNHCR has one of the most sophisticated and accurate registration systems in the world operating in Syria. The numbers of refugees registered with UNHCR as well as the needs of many of the most vulnerable are well known. Donors have not been able to even meet the needs of registered refugees let alone those who choose not to register. The U.S. especially has a special responsibility to help host governments ensure that the basic assistance and protection needs of this population continue to be met until durable solutions are readily available.

REFUGEES IN IRAQ NEED DURABLE SOLUTIONS

There are some 35,000 refugees in Iraq. One of the largest and most vulnerable populations is the stateless Palestinians. Though successful efforts have been made to resettle Palestinians from three border camps, the needs of those in Damascus, Al Hol Refugee Camp in Syria and Baghdad must be urgently addressed. Unlike Iraqis, Palestinian

refugees from Iraq have been denied access to asylum in neighboring countries and subjected to forced encampment. In Baghdad they continue to be subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention, raids by the police and army, and armed violence. Their recently issued identification documents are noticeably different from Iraqi documents, making them easy targets at checkpoints. Most Palestinians attempt to acquire Iraqi documentation, and the men regularly travel with women to help protect them against arbitrary arrest and detention. Hiding their Palestinian identity is a matter of survival for these refugees.

At the start of the war in 2003 there were an estimated 35,000 Palestinian refugees in Baghdad. Today there are only 11,000. Left behind are the elderly, the disabled, and some of the most destitute families. Even if they attempted to flee, there is nowhere for them to run—the Jordanian and Syrian borders are closed to them and UNHCR actively turns away Palestinians attempting to flee to Al Waleed Camp on the border.

Many of the families are in need of urgent assistance. UNHCR needs to conduct a full assessment of this population and develop criteria for resettlement. In Syria UNHCR needs to immediately refer Palestinian cases in Damascus for resettlement and continue resettlement out of Al Hol Camp.

CONCLUSION

As the U.S. continues to draw down its military forces and eventually end its occupation in Iraq, the U.S. and other donors must increase their humanitarian and development assistance and commitment to finding long-term solutions for displaced Iraqis. Millions of people are still displaced without access to shelter, food, health care or other basics. It is too soon for the U.S. government and other donors to abandon the needs of the Iraqi people. Likewise, the UN must seek to increase its presence and resources inside the country and throughout the region, ensuring that Iraq's most vulnerable are protected and assisted until durable solutions are available.

Refugees International Senior Advocate Elizabeth Campbell and consultant Nir Rosen assessed the situation for displaced Iraqis in Iraq and Syria in February 2010.