



# **INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE**

*December 2007*

## ***Uprooted Iraqis: An Urgent Crisis***

Millions of Iraqis have fled their homes and are now living precariously either as refugees in neighboring countries or as internally displaced people (IDPs) inside Iraq itself. Many more want to flee but are trapped within Iraq, often in considerable danger and without adequate access to clean water, food, healthcare or education. These people need help now.

The United Nations has estimated that approximately 60,000 Iraqis have been fleeing their homes every month, mostly because they or their families have been directly threatened with death, torture or kidnapping. The total number of displaced Iraqis is estimated at more than 4.4 million people. Approximately half of these are now living in neighboring countries, especially Syria and Jordan. Another 2.2 million uprooted people are inside Iraq.<sup>1</sup>



Iraqi boy amidst rubble

Photo: Gerald Martone/The IRC

<b>Displaced Iraqis in the Region</b>		<b>Internally Displaced Iraqis</b>	
Syria	1.2 – 1.4 million	Northern Iraq	797,900
Jordan	450,000 – 500,000	Central Iraq	812,200
Egypt	70,000	Southern Iraq	801,500
Iran	57,000		
Lebanon	20 – 40,000		
Turkey	10,000		
Gulf States	200,000		
<b>Total</b>	<b>2.01 – 2.28 million</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>2.41 million</b>

<sup>1</sup> More than 1 million fled before 2003, more than 190,000 between 2003 and 2005 and about 1.2 million since the bombing of the al-Askari mosque in Samarra in February 2006.

*SOURCE: UNHCR, November 2007 and Inter-Agency Standing Committee  
"Cluster F: Internally Displaced Persons in Iraq – Update," 21 November 2007*

Iraq's neighbors have now closed or severely restricted their borders to Iraqis and, with the partial exception of Turkey, none recognize Iraqis as *bona fide* refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention. Similarly, at least 11 of Iraq's 18 governorates have restricted the access of IDPs to their areas.

## INSIDE IRAQ

### A Humanitarian Crisis

The following statistics from the United Nations highlight the current conditions in Iraq:<sup>2</sup>

- 1 in 3 Iraqi children under the age of five has access to safe drinking water.
- 15.7 percent of Iraqi children are underweight.
- More than 220,000 school-age children have been displaced from their homes since early 2006, and many of them have either stopped going to school or have missed many weeks.
- 34 percent of IDPs surveyed said they are unable to access the medications they need.
- There have been outbreaks of cholera in Baghdad and other parts of the country.
- 4 million people in Iraq are considered hungry and in need of food aid – access to food is a priority need for almost 71 percent of IDPs.
- More than 72 percent of displaced Iraqis say that shelter is their top priority.

### More and Better Aid

Vulnerable people in Iraq need impartial, lifesaving aid immediately. While long-term reconstruction of the country must remain a priority, immediate needs are going unmet. Much of the billions of dollars that international donors have pledged for and spent on Iraq are allocated for reconstruction. Large amounts of reconstruction-designated money, including from the Government of Iraq, also remain unused.<sup>3</sup> Much of this funding depends on decisions made by the Government of Iraq and often goes to projects that are not designed to meet urgent humanitarian needs. Many Iraqis who are unable to meet all of their daily, basic needs are aware of the reconstruction focus and funding, and say that they resent what they see as a lack of concern for and impact on their critical situation. Beginning in 2008, the quantity of national food rations distributed freely to all needy Iraqi families will be reduced because of lack of government financial support. In response to immediate needs, the United Nations has set up a special Expanded Humanitarian Response Fund (ERF) – administered by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) – “to provide quickly-disbursed funds... to undertake urgent humanitarian activities in Iraq in order to alleviate the suffering of the Iraqi population.”<sup>4</sup> But, as of 9 December 2007 only three countries had pledged any funds, totaling just \$1.43 million. Some donors have said that they are unable to significantly increase their humanitarian funding because of insecurity and lack of access. Security is certainly a serious problem in many parts of Iraq. However, international

<sup>2</sup> UNOCHA, “Humanitarian Crisis In Iraq: Facts and Figures”, 13 November 2007

<sup>3</sup> See for example Joseph A Christoff, Director International Affairs and Trade, United States Government Accountability Office, testimony before the Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, US House of Representatives, “Securing, Stabilizing, and Rebuilding Iraq: GAO Audits and Key Oversight Issues”, 30 October 2007, pg 1 and Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, “Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 30 Oct 07, pg 24

<sup>4</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “United Nations Expanded Humanitarian Response Fund for Iraq Charter”, 15 August 2007, pg 2

NGOs working in Iraq and many Iraqi organizations – that are already delivering essential, lifesaving services – have the capacity to serve more people with more resources.

### **The Role of the UN**

The United Nations has been understandably traumatized by the attack on its headquarters in Baghdad in August 2003 that killed 22 staff and visitors. The violence has worsened since then and made it extremely hazardous for the UN to work in some parts of the country, especially in Baghdad. However, the UN needs to take a lead in helping vulnerable Iraqis throughout the country, while avoiding unreasonable risks and with full support from the international community. This means maximizing its creativity and flexibility in choosing how and where it works.

In early August 2007, the United Nations Security Council renewed and revised the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI). Humanitarian affairs were included as part of a unified and updated UNAMI, making it harder for humanitarian action to remain independent from the UN's political engagement. David Shearer, who currently has three titles and jobs – Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Iraq, UN Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator – will need to work hard to ensure that the UN's humanitarian response is as independent and impartial as possible.

## **REFUGEES IN THE REGION**

### **Legal Status**

For a number of reasons, including security concerns and fear of Iraqis becoming a long-term refugee burden (as Palestinian refugees are often perceived by countries hosting them), the countries hosting Iraqis in the region do not recognize them as refugees or offer them any comparable legal status. This leaves many Iraqis living in fear of jail or forced return. Lack of legal status recognized by host governments seriously undermines their freedom of movement and access to basic services. The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has created identity papers for Iraqis in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. However, these documents offer no guarantee of protection from deportation or arrest and only around 203,000 Iraqis have registered so far. In practice, the status of each Iraqi refugee is often left open to the interpretation of individual government officials. The majority of Iraqis do everything possible not to be noticed, aware that host governments see them as illegal, with expired visas, undocumented entry or invalid residency permits.

### **Living Conditions**

Although living situations vary throughout the region, Iraqi refugees generally have access to some basic services from host governments and many receive some additional support from local and international charitable organizations. However, impoverished Iraqis have been barely coping, living a basic existence using savings, remittances from relatives abroad (often still living in Iraq) and money from work where it is available (usually illegally). All of these resources are very fragile. For many Iraqi families, their savings last only six to eight months after they arrive, or less if someone in the family has a chronic medical condition. Charity, access to



Refugee children at school in Beirut

Photo: The IRC

services and work depend on the generosity of others and can easily decrease or disappear, leaving Iraqis desperate and destitute.

### **Access to Education**

The influx of Iraqi children is placing considerable strain on the education systems of host countries, forcing schools to operate in shifts. Fear of closer government scrutiny and potential arrest or deportation may be preventing some parents from registering their children at schools. Iraqi children in Lebanon and Turkey are also at a linguistic disadvantage because classes are not held in Arabic. The United Nations has been able to provide some support for school books, fees and materials. Unfortunately, the joint UNHCR/UNICEF appeal in summer 2007 for children's education in the region has so far received \$47.1 million of a total request of \$129 million – 37 percent.

### **Access to Healthcare**

Iraqi refugees are generally able to access emergency health services and primary care for children up to the age of five. However, access to other services is costly. The situation is particularly critical for people with advanced illnesses and for older children, who commonly suffer respiratory, intestinal and flu-like illnesses, which can be debilitating or fatal. In practice, many Iraqis simply go without proper healthcare, including those with chronic diseases such as cancer, asthma, diabetes or kidney problems. Unmet healthcare needs are a central aspect of this humanitarian crisis.

### **Employment**

In Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, the vast majority of Iraqis are not allowed to work legally, while in Turkey sponsorship by an employer and an expensive work permit are required. In practice, many seek employment in the black market, putting themselves and their families at greater risk of arrest, deportation and exploitation. The growing numbers of children and women working in casual labor markets is a cause for concern. They are often more easily accepted because men are more vulnerable to arrest, but such work places them at great risk of violence and exploitation, including sexual exploitation.

### **Return in Safety and Dignity**

In November 2007, the Government of Iraq reported that more than 46,000 Iraqis had returned to Iraq in the previous month. It also stated that over 25,000 IDPs had returned to their homes.<sup>5</sup> In both cases, an improving security situation was cited as the main reason. However, the Government of Iraq has reportedly been paying for buses and planes to transport returnees from Syria to Iraq and offering \$800 to families who can verify that they have returned home. Moreover, a UNHCR survey has found that many internally-displaced returnees cited economic difficulties caused by their long displacement, and visa restrictions, as a major reason for going home. It reported that many had run out of or nearly depleted their savings, and while some were indeed encouraged by reports of improved security, many expressed concern about longer-term security, especially given the continuing presence of militias.<sup>6</sup> Some Iraqis have also reported that they are unable to return to their homes, because their houses have been “destroyed, looted or occupied”.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> The Iraqi Red Crescent's estimate for returned refugees is 25,000-28,000. The Iraqi Ministry of Displacement has revised the Government of Iraq's estimate of returned IDPs to 10,000. (UNHCR spokesperson William Spindler, briefing note, “Iraq Returns Latest”, 7 December 2006)

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR spokesperson Jennifer Pagonis, briefing note, “UNHCR Cautious About Returns”, UNHCR, 23 November 2007 and UNHCR spokesperson William Spindler, briefing note, “Iraq returns latest”, 7 December 2006

<sup>7</sup> See for example IRIN, “Returning to Destroyed, Looted or Occupied Homes”, 9 December 2007

The International Rescue Committee fully agrees with the UNHCR statement of 23 November on returns to Iraq: “UNHCR does not believe that the time has come to promote, organize or encourage returns. That would be possible only when proper return conditions are in place – including material and legal support and physical safety. Presently, there is no sign of any large-scale return to Iraq as the security situation in many parts of the country remains volatile and unpredictable....”<sup>8</sup> It is essential that return does not become coerced or forced. No one, including the Government of Iraq, should pay desperate, destitute people to return to places that are unsafe. Instead, assistance should help Iraqi refugees and IDPs meet their basic needs in a safe place.

## ASYLUM AND RESETTLEMENT

### Sharing International Responsibility

Admission to a third country is currently the only solution that exists for the most vulnerable Iraqis, even though it is only available to a small fraction of the uprooted. The international community has a moral obligation to share the responsibility of hosting Iraqi refugees. In addition, the sudden influx of Iraqi refugees threatens to undermine the stability of an already unstable region. A bold and creative response is required. This has been achieved before: In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the U.S. and European countries recognized the scale of the crisis and resettled more than one million Vietnamese refugees. More recently, hundreds of thousands of people fleeing the wars in the Balkans were given temporary protection across Europe and close to 150,000 were resettled to the United States.

### Refugee Resettlement

The response of the majority of states to the crisis in Iraq has been strikingly ungenerous. The numbers of Iraqis accepted globally on refugee resettlement programs<sup>9</sup> actually fell between 2003 and 2006 (according to UNHCR, only 404 refugees were resettled to third countries in 2006, compared to 1,425 in 2003). Meanwhile, the numbers expected for resettlement in other major states, such as the UK and Germany, are much lower. As of early December, UNHCR had referred 20,472 of the most vulnerable Iraqis to 16 countries for resettlement. However, only 4,575 Iraqis, 22 percent, had actually departed for resettlement countries.<sup>10</sup> The U.S. government has pledged to admit up to 12,000 refugees in fiscal year 2008. With the world’s largest resettlement program, the U.S. could



Accepted and waiting to be resettled to the U.S.

Photo: The IRC

<sup>8</sup> UNHCR spokesperson Jennifer Pagonis, briefing note, “UNHCR Cautious About Returns”, UNHCR, 23 November 2007

<sup>9</sup> Eleven countries have formal refugee resettlement programs: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, the UK and the U.S. Others that are beginning resettlement programs include Benin, Burkina Faso, Brazil, Chile and Iceland. Countries with no formal resettlement programs but that accept refugees on an *ad hoc* basis include Portugal, Spain, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, the Czech Republic and Lithuania.

<sup>10</sup> UNHCR, press release, “UNHCR Meets 2007 Resettlement Referral Target for Iraqi Refugees”, 12 December 2007

allow significantly more Iraqi refugees to enter. Delays related to logistics, security concerns and inadequate staffing meant that the U.S. fell far short of its fiscal year 2007 target of 7,000, eventually resettling only 1,608 Iraqis. By comparison, UNHCR has referred at least 14,798 vulnerable Iraqi refugees to the US for resettlement.<sup>11</sup> Resettlement is not zero-sum. With sufficient resources, the U.S. can satisfy its security-screening requirements and resettle many more vulnerable Iraqis, while continuing to resettle refugees from other parts of the world.

### **Iraqi Asylum-Seekers**

Many Iraqis have fled to third countries on their own and sought asylum. They have encountered widely differing responses and procedures. Sweden, a country of only 9 million, is notable for its relative generosity, recognizing protection status to more Iraqis in 2006 than all other EU states combined. 20,000 Iraqis are expected to settle in Sweden in 2007. In contrast, Greece has not recognized protection status for any Iraqi refugees and the UK's rate of recognition for Iraqis in 2006 was just 12 percent, despite the UNHCR's recommendation that all Iraqi asylum-seekers from central and southern Iraq should be considered refugees based on 1951 Convention criteria.

### **Forcible Returns**

Some governments have forced people back to Iraq. The UK has returned more Iraqis than any other European state, sending them to the Kurdish-controlled north, which it regards as sufficiently stable for returns (despite opposition from the local Kurdish authorities, the ongoing violence across the country and the strains already felt by the three northern governorates). Since November 2005, the UK has forcibly removed around 100 Iraqis, at an estimated cost of over \$2 million, while also denying assistance to Iraqis who refuse to return voluntarily to Iraq.

### **Iraqi Employees**

Many former employees of international civilian or military missions, NGOs or media organizations are now targets for persecution. Following a public outcry, some coalition governments are protecting former employees of their armed forces or civilian missions in Iraq. Of these, the Danish approach is most laudable. The Danish Government issued visas to all former employees and their families and relocated them to Denmark. The U.S. has introduced special immigrant visas (SIVs) for former employees and contractors, through which 821 people were resettled in fiscal year 2007. The Iraqi SIV ceiling for fiscal year 2008 has already been met, although the U.S. is poised to enact legislation providing for an additional 5,000 SIVs each year over the next five years for Iraqis who were employed by the U.S. government. The legislation entitles these Iraqis to the same resettlement benefits provided to people admitted as refugees. The UK has also announced a package for employees who



Iraqi refugee family that fled violence in Iraq

Photo: The IRC

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

worked for longer than 12 months; these plans focus on former employees who used a high level of English in their work.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The International Rescue Committee calls on all parties to recognize and acknowledge that violence in Iraq has triggered an enormous and urgent humanitarian crisis. We further urge that:

### **The Government of Iraq**

- Re-program part of its unspent reconstruction funds to meet immediate humanitarian needs in Iraq, through national and local governmental and non-governmental agencies, on a non-sectarian basis;
- Provide more substantial funding to support Iraqi refugees living in bordering countries;
- Uphold the principle of voluntary, informed refugee repatriation and return, by providing transparent and accurate information about the security situation to the uprooted;
- Refrain from providing incentives for people to return to dangerous places;

### **Regional Governments**

- Ensure that Iraqi refugees have adequate legal protection, access to services and freedom of movement;
- Allow Iraqis access to migrant and informal working markets so that they are more self-sufficient, contribute to the local economy and rely less on assistance;
- Encourage Iraqi families to send their children to school;

### **The United Nations**

- Find creative and flexible mechanisms to provide an impartial humanitarian response to as many Iraqis as possible;
- Accelerate the process of registering Iraqi refugees and request more funding if necessary;

### **International Donors**

- Re-program existing reconstruction funds, and provide significant new contributions for nimble, humanitarian-focused funding mechanisms, such as the ERF;
- Provide aid to Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey to meet the increased demand for health, education, electricity, water and other basic services related to the large influx of Iraqi refugees (for example, the Government of Syria has said that hosting Iraqi refugees costs it \$1.6 billion per year and the Government of Jordan has put its annual hosting costs at \$1 billion);
- Ensure sufficient contributions to UN, international and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to assist Iraqi refugees and their host communities, including the funding needed by UNHCR to resource adequate staff for refugee registration;
- Ensure that no Iraqis are enticed or forced to return to places that are dangerous, lack basic services or offer no means to earn a living;

### **The United States Government**

- Provide an emergency, comprehensive package of aid to uprooted Iraqis on an expedited basis, including: at least \$130 million in emergency supplemental funding for Iraqis inside Iraq through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), as recommended by the NGO coalitions of InterAction and Refugee Council USA;
- Provide significant increases in bilateral aid to countries in the region to help share the burden of providing help to Iraqi refugees (through USAID the U.S. gave Jordan \$10.3 million for fiscal year 2007 to deal with the impact of the Iraqi refugee crisis);<sup>12</sup>
- Offer resettlement to many more Iraqis, perhaps hundreds of thousands over a multi-year period; and encourage other countries to offer asylum to uprooted Iraqis;

### **EU Member States**

- Expand resettlement programs to accommodate greatly increased numbers of Iraqis, or, where resettlement programs do not exist, consider *ad hoc* protection programs, as were offered to people fleeing the Balkans;
- Adopt a more consistent approach to the treatment of asylum applications;
- Halt all forced returns to Iraq and ensure that Iraqi refugees and asylum-seekers receive support;

### **Governments that employ Iraqis inside Iraq**

- Make special arrangements to protect Iraqi employees, especially when they are threatened because of their association with the international coalition; and
- Help make similar arrangements for Iraqis who have worked for other international entities, such as NGOs or media organizations.

---

<sup>12</sup> Office of the Spokesman, fact sheet, “United States Humanitarian Assistance for Displaced Iraqis”, U.S. Department of State, 5 December 2007