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Five-Year Iraq Conflict Has Caused Massive Refugee Crisis; IRC Commission Calls U.S. / World Response ‘Grossly Inadequate’

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq five years ago and its violent aftermath have produced one of the largest humanitarian crises of our time, yet the “Coalition of the Willing” has been mostly unwilling to own up to it and provide adequate aid for the innocent bystanders.

More than four million Iraqi civilians are estimated to be uprooted by horrific violence and in dire need of help in a crisis that is largely hidden from the public and ignored by the international community, according to a report issued today by the International Rescue Committee’s Commission on Iraqi Refugees. *The report, “Five Years Later, a Hidden Crisis,” is available at www.theIRC.org/iraqi-refugees.*

The report comes after an IRC Commission trip in February to refugee-inundated Syria and Jordan to examine the worsening crisis and seek ways to expedite aid and resettlement. The delegates met with Syrian President Bashar al Assad and other Syrian, Jordanian, Iraqi, U.S. and U.N. officials, along with dozens of Iraqi refugees.

“Neither the U.S. nor the rest of the world is paying sufficient heed to the crisis,” the report states, adding that help offered by the U.S., primarily, as well as other international and regional donors, has been paltry and halfhearted.

The IRC Commission found that already bleak conditions for hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees in Syria and Jordan are growing worse by the day. Most live in dilapidated and congested apartments in poor urban areas. They are running out of money, because they are not permitted to work, and can no longer afford the basics, like rent, heat and food. They are getting sick or suffer chronic illnesses, but have limited access to medical care. They are severely traumatized by the violence they witnessed, endured and fled. They suffer deep despair because of lost homes, livelihoods and loved ones. They worry incessantly about the fate of their children and the safety of relatives displaced or trapped by violence in Iraq. They are anxious about their uncertain future.

The commissioners point out that the majority of Iraqi refugees are educated, had decent jobs and were leading middle class lives in Iraq, but that most are now destitute. "The chasm between where they were and where they are now is deep and wide," they say.

Contrary to media reports that indicate refugees are repatriating because of improved safety in Iraq, all Iraqis in Syria and Jordan queried by the commission found unimaginable the prospect of returning any time soon to ruined and occupied homes in still-volatile communities.

The IRC Commission believes that the United States Government has a special responsibility to aid Iraqis and significantly address a humanitarian crisis that it had a role in creating. However, the U.S. cannot do it alone. The delegates say the scale of the humanitarian emergency requires a significant international response and that Europe and Arab states, including Iraq, should and can be doing much more. "It is both a humanitarian and political imperative," they assert.

The IRC Commission calls for the following steps to address immediate and long term needs:

Aid

- The international community, including the Iraqi government, must dramatically boost aid for the next two to four years for internally displaced Iraqis and overwhelmed countries like Syria and Jordan that unfairly shoulder the burden of the crisis. The United States should increase bilateral aid to Jordan, Egypt and Lebanon and channel more resources to U.N. aid programs in Syria, where refugee influxes have overburdened clinics and classrooms.
- U.N. appeals must be met and the United States should lead the humanitarian effort by picking up 50 percent of the tab. The U.S. has contributed only \$197 million this year for the humanitarian crisis, less than it spends every day on Iraq combat operations.
- The IRC Commission praises Jordan and Syria for their generosity, but urges them to support aid delivery by rapidly registering and facilitating the work of resettlement and relief organizations and allowing refugees to work legally, without fear of deportation.

Resettlement

- Many Iraqi refugees cannot return safely under any circumstances. The United States has a moral obligation to give refuge to these and other vulnerable Iraqis, including widowed women with children and the tens of thousands who put their lives on the line to work for Americans in Iraq and are in danger as a result. The administration's goal of bringing in 12,000 this year is extremely meager in comparison to the numbers of refugees the U.S. rightly rescued from Vietnam and the Balkans. That number should increase to at least 30,000 a year for the next few years.
- Let Sweden, which had no role in the Iraq conflict, yet has welcomed more asylum seekers than the United States and the rest of Europe combined, serve as an example. EU member states should expand their quotas, cease forced returns of refugees to Iraq, and ensure Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers receive appropriate care.

Sustainable Return

- The international community, with the vital involvement of Arab states, must begin steadfast and collaborative work to achieve conditions that will allow for the safe and voluntary return of displaced Iraqis. It is the only viable solution for the majority of them.
- A comprehensive plan for the region's future is required, building on the April 2007 U.N. forum in Geneva. The IRC Commission proposes an international conference and inclusive planning effort, chaired by U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, to develop a humanitarian, political and diplomatic strategy to tackle the crisis in its entirety. The goals would include addressing the immediate needs of displaced Iraqis and host countries, and devising a plan for the eventual repatriation of uprooted populations and the rehabilitation of their communities. It's a daunting task but the future of Iraq and the entire region is at stake.

The IRC Commission on Iraqi Refugees includes Morton Abramowitz, The Century Foundation; Susan Dentzer, The Newshour; Kathleen Newland, Migration Policy Institute; Drummond Pike, The Tides Foundation; George Rupp, International Rescue Committee; Jean Kennedy Smith, former Ambassador to Ireland; Maureen White, former U.S. Representative to UNICEF; John Whitehead, former Deputy Secretary of State; and James Wolfensohn, former President of the World Bank.

To speak with these and other experts on the Iraqi refugee crisis, CONTACT: Melissa Winkler, 212-551-0972 / 646-734-0305. *The IRC is a global humanitarian aid organization, assisting uprooted Iraqis in Jordan and Iraq and resettling Iraqi refugees across the United States. Working in 25 war zones around the world, the IRC has been providing help and hope to victims of conflict for 75 years.*