

*International Conference on Addressing the Humanitarian Needs of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons inside Iraq and in Neighbouring Countries
Geneva, 17-18 April 2007*

NGO Statement on the Humanitarian Crisis in Iraq

This statement has been drafted in consultation with a broad spectrum of NGOs.

Mr. Chairman,

Iraq is facing a humanitarian crisis with up to an estimated eight million people in need of immediate assistance and protection. The affected population faces escalating violence, ongoing military operations, human rights violations, and a crisis of protection. At the same time, the increase in violence has severely constrained humanitarian space and relief provisions have become very limited. The humanitarian situation is further exacerbated by the combination of degraded basic services, loss of livelihoods, and rampant inflation, which have increased the vulnerability of the people.

While horrific violence dominates the lives of millions of ordinary people inside Iraq, the displacement, malnutrition, chronic poverty, and illness that have been increasing over the last four years are crippling the lives of hundreds of thousands more. The protection vacuum that characterises much of Iraq has resulted in huge unmet needs and a denial of fundamental rights. The people of Iraq have a right to humanitarian assistance, but this right is being neglected.

Understanding the Crisis

The humanitarian crisis in Iraq has not yet been adequately acknowledged, fully assessed, or properly understood. While donors and the UN system have been pre-occupied with reconstruction, development, and political benchmarks, they, and the Iraqi government itself, are only just starting to acknowledge the existence of humanitarian needs. This conference is a welcome step.

As UNHCR has estimated, there are 1.9 million internally displaced persons in Iraq, a figure increasing by some 50,000 each month, in addition to the 40,000 to 50,000 fleeing from Iraq on a monthly basis. While the situation is particularly severe in the centre of the country and to a slightly lesser degree in the South, authorities and host populations also struggle to provide for displaced populations in the more stable and developed areas of the North.

The situation may be further evolving with the authorities in some districts or governorates reportedly denying permission to people to settle within their boundaries and even threatening to expel them. While the course of displacement in 2004-2005 was assessed as a short-term phenomenon, the new displacement reality is shaping up to be a long-term trend. The overwhelming volume of internal displacement has been concentrated in a short time period. The ensuing needs have been exacerbated by ongoing violence, dismal security conditions and declining living standards for IDPs

and their host communities alike. These need to be addressed as a matter of urgency through a collaborative and coordinated response.

Certainly the refugee and IDP caseloads are in immediate need of humanitarian relief, as are the “hidden” affected people inside Iraq who suffer the impact of violence on their daily lives: shortfalls in basic services, inefficient functioning of the Public Distribution System (PDS), loss of livelihoods and uncontrolled inflation. As a major proportion of IDPs in Iraq are living with communities, families, and friends it is important that humanitarian assistance focus on the coping mechanisms of whole communities by improving water supplies, electricity, shelters, schools, and income generation activities and not focus on building camps and emergency latrines. The constant pressure faced by Iraqi citizens has steadily eroded their coping mechanisms and traditional forms of solidarity that are extended in times of crises, with the result that they require external sources of relief assistance.

Special Protection Needs

Many groups continue to suffer persecution in Iraq, particularly professionals; women; Iraqis employed by foreign contractors, the UN or other international organisations including NGOs; and ethnic and religious minorities. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are frequently victims of human rights violations originating from ethno-religious differences or of a political and criminal order. The security of third-country nationals, stateless persons, and particularly the Palestinian refugees and thousands of refugees from Turkey, Iran and Syria in Iraq has drastically deteriorated.

Based on 2005 figures, nearly 5.6 million Iraqis were living below the poverty line and over 4 million people are food insecure and in dire need of different types of humanitarian assistance. Twenty-eight percent of Iraqi children suffer from malnutrition: the chronic malnutrition rate of children in food insecure households is 23%. One child in 10 suffers from chronic disease or illness. Children in Iraq have more chance of dying before the age of five than children in any other Middle Eastern country. Women are suffering because of unjust policies and from the militancy of intolerant groups. Special consideration should be given to single-headed households and youth, who are the most vulnerable.

Four years of daily violence and a high level of psychological trauma, following 20 years of wars and sanctions has inflicted enormous damage on the mental and physical health of tens of thousands of direct victims, including tortured people, as well as their families and society at large. Assistance to strengthen medical and psychological rehabilitation services is needed to enable victims to regain their capacity to effectively contribute to the development of their society.

The Challenges of Working in Iraq

International and national NGOs working in Iraq have become some of the very few key humanitarian implementers on the ground, yet they face multiple obstacles in responding to the numerous needs. NGOs have met with success and failures compounded by the problems faced by all stakeholders involved in delivering aid and assistance. However the main comparative advantages that NGOs, especially national NGOs, have are their flexible approaches and their ability to react quickly to develop strategies and responses. NGOs are able to adapt their structures and activities to the volatile context and newly emerging needs, build relative trust and acceptance in the

communities in which they operate, adhere to an impartial and neutral approach in their service delivery within the limitations of keeping a low profile, and help correct some of the misperceptions the population may have about NGOs, their affiliations and objectives. NGOs delivering humanitarian aid distinguish themselves from other types of agencies, and especially from the military, by emphasising their neutrality and impartiality through their actions, and putting the humanitarian imperative as an absolute first.

Responding Better

These efforts have allowed INGOs to maintain their own capacities and to extend their services and assistance at a national level, particularly by building upon the capacity of national NGOs. Of critical importance, they are still able to access communities and represent one of the very few humanitarian actors and witnesses on the ground. However, the conflicts in Iraq are saturated with multiple stakeholders' strategic interests and agendas, politicising the context and compromising humanitarian access conditions. The result is that NGOs often face obstacles in accessing the most vulnerable. There is a need to review access options and obstacles, make use of the comparative advantages and experiences that NGOs have, and to identify viable solutions and the supports needed for their implementation.

The clear implication is that more humanitarian assistance is needed in Iraq, both immediately and for the foreseeable future. Recognition of, and actions to assist, vulnerable communities are in place, but as conditions have worsened, assistance has not been able to keep pace. It is essential that humanitarian space is maintained and expanded for relief to be provided. The main constraints to increased assistance are determining how to get the job done in an adverse security environment, and having sufficient and adequately flexible financial and human resources in place to address the most serious unmet needs.

The ability to respond is often constrained by a lack of flexible funding that can adapt to the changing humanitarian needs. Furthermore, the withdrawal of some donors is limiting the amount of funding available for humanitarian programmes from countries that are not parties to the conflict. Some NGOs feel that taking funds from parties involved in the conflict jeopardises their neutrality and impartiality, in addition to increasing the risk taken by their teams in the field. This decrease in funds from other sources undermines the humanitarian response in the field, even as the needs have escalated.

An International Response to the Situation

Despite the current security challenges facing humanitarian work in Iraq, there are a number of areas where more can be done to address humanitarian needs. This conference is one way of acknowledging the humanitarian crisis, but in order to improve the ability of NGOs to respond in a neutral and impartial manner, donors and UN agencies need to provide greater, more readily accessible, long-term, flexible emergency humanitarian funds. The necessary mechanisms must be put in place to ensure that NGOs, including Iraqi NGOs, can receive funds in a timely manner, building on discussions underway to better operationalise remote programming mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation.

As stated earlier, the IDP situation in Iraq is going to be long-term and the numbers will likely grow the longer the crisis lasts. Therefore, emergency relief is not enough. International donors have to give more generously so that the needs of the IDP population for temporary housing that offers protection from cold and heat, water and sanitation, and temporary schools for IDP children can be adequately addressed. To meet these needs it will be essential to cooperate with Iraqi national and local NGOs. At the same time, involving Iraqi NGOs and building upon their capacities will contribute to a strong civil society in the future.

The primary responsibility to assist IDPs lies with the Iraqi authorities. There is a need to support the capacities of the Government of Iraq to enable them to make funds, goods, and facilities available to NGOs, facilitate the movement of aid workers, and ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid.

The UN, NGOs, and other humanitarian actors on the ground need to illustrate that despite the challenging situation, it is still possible to address humanitarian needs inside Iraq, if the necessary resources are made available, by increasing their communication and exchanges of information with other humanitarian actors. The UN particularly needs to revisit the way in which it is working in Iraq by overhauling its security procedures. NGOs are able to work with international staff in many parts of Iraq. It is time for the UN humanitarian agencies to find similar means of working in the country to respond to humanitarian needs. The UN needs to play a greater role in protection, coordination, and information-sharing through a significantly increased presence throughout Iraq.

There is a need to work better together to develop indicators and a verification mechanism to identify priority needs and an early warning mechanism, as well as to continue developing capacity building programmes with Iraqi aid workers and local communities so that they can better respond to humanitarian needs.

In today's closely connected world it is not possible to turn a blind eye to a humanitarian crisis anywhere in the world, however great the challenges. To meet needs in Iraq, UN agencies, governments, international donors and international, national and local NGOs must cooperate to develop innovative approaches that make it possible to work even in the most adverse security environment.

Thank you.