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Iraq: Time to Acknowledge and Address the Displacement Crisis

The humanitarian and displacement crisis in Iraq is growing in intensity and gravity. The UN estimates that more than two million Iraqis are now refugees in neighboring countries and more than 1.9 million have fled for safer areas within Iraq.

Of these internally displaced people (IDPs), more than 730,000 have fled since the Samarra Shrine bombing of February 2006, which intensified the sectarian violence that is tearing Iraq apart.

Few Iraqis are untouched by the violence and chaos. Yet the Iraqi government and the United States are still largely unwilling to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation and accept that it constitutes a humanitarian emergency. Their reluctance impedes the work of the United Nations and potential donor governments. Neither the UN nor potential donors can defy the express wishes of the host government. Further, many donor governments believe that the U.S. must take the lead in addressing the humanitarian consequences of the war. Until recently, the U.S. administration had shown little willingness to respond to the needs of the displaced and other vulnerable Iraqis on the scale required.

The result through 2006 was surreal: the Iraqi government and the United Nations continued to pretend that the country context was conducive to rehabilitation, reconstruction, and development. The Iraqi Trust Fund (ITF) was established to allow UN agencies to withdraw funds to assist Iraq's new government build its capacity, and to contribute to the creation of a stable Iraq in which the rule of law prevailed. The UN Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI) has the dual role of political support to the government and humanitarian coordination, but the former trumped the latter, making it extremely difficult for the UN to advocate with the Iraqi government for agencies to take a stronger humanitarian role.

The UN Country Team is finally starting to recognize the humanitarian crisis and planning to respond accordingly. On February 1, 2007, UN agencies met in Geneva to discuss their next steps in light of the situation and affirmed that the

Iraq situation constituted a humanitarian crisis. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has recently decided to get involved by sending a team to Jordan, which might improve general coordination. The separation of the political and humanitarian wings of the UN can only help the organization operate in Iraq.

Funding, however, remains a serious obstacle. Trust Fund resources are only available for reconstruction and development projects. But because there are still tens of millions of dollars left in the ITF, the UN feels that launching a common appeal to address the humanitarian crisis would not be well received by donors. Instead, the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General, responsible for humanitarian issues, is looking at ways to create a parallel track for agencies to access ITF money.

In the meantime, UN agencies must operate within certain limits, sometimes creating absurd situations. The European Commission, which handles the development work of the European Union as opposed to the humanitarian ECHO, just provided 10 million Euros through the ITF for internally displaced people in Iraq, but the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) will only be able to access these funds if it presents its projects using development language. As a result of the wide availability of funds for development, some UN agencies, such as UNICEF and the World Health Organization, are reluctant to let go of this approach. This, combined with political pressure from the U.S., has made it extremely difficult for the UN family to agree on adopting a uniform humanitarian approach. Unless the UN leadership declares a humanitarian emergency or the Iraqi government requests their help, agencies like UNICEF and WHO will continue to work only to support the long-term development work of government institutions.

With respect to the response to the needs of the internally displaced, the UN adopted the collaborative approach, which involves loose coordination based on the strengths and interests of individual agencies. They meet on a monthly basis in Amman to discuss courses of action. In practice, UNHCR is responsible for providing assistance in the three northern governorates and is now moving towards greater involvement in the six southern ones to assist the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which is leading assistance efforts in 15 Iraqi governorates. UN agencies are currently operating under the assumption that there could be up to a million people newly displaced in the year to come.

UNHCR's current appeal for IDPs in Iraq is for only eight to nine million dollars. According to a UNHCR official, "Even with the collaborative approach, we are not able to do much. If we were looking at responding to real needs, then even \$150 million would not be enough." UNHCR's program responding to internal displacement barely exists; for the moment, the agency has only started to do limited needs assessments in the north and is in the process of devising assistance projects to respond to the needs of the displaced in the Kurdish areas. "Until 2006, assistance to IDPs was done on an ad hoc basis," the same UNHCR official told Refugees International. "It is only since Samarra that we have realized displacement is going to get worse. 2007 will be the first year that we actually plan a response for IDPs."

This lack of forward and contingency planning by UNHCR applies to other agencies as well. Throughout the rest of Iraq, IOM is facing the same budgetary constraints. The IOM program has three pillars: monitoring and assessment, community assistance projects, and emergency relief assistance. For 2007 IOM has very limited funds for emergency relief -- a mere few hundred thousand dollars according to one of its representatives. Again, donors have been hard to mobilize. From 2003 to 2007, the U.S. has provided IOM, the main service provider for the internally displaced in Iraq, with only \$10 million total. The U.S. is planning to fund three million dollars of IOM's budget this year, around \$1.50 per displaced Iraqi.

Operating in Iraq is a difficult task for all humanitarian organizations. The UN is in a particularly difficult position because of how the Iraqi people perceive it. Not only are most still bitter after years of sanctions, they now associate the UN with the U.S.-led invasion, as the UN was not able to stop the war nor to respond to its humanitarian consequences. Simply put, in the words of a NGO representative working in Iraq: "Iraqis don't see the UN anywhere. They are nowhere except in the Green Zone. And when they come out, it is only escorted by the Multi-National Forces. What can Iraqis think?" Although Refugees International acknowledges the fact that many areas of Iraq are dangerous and require special security measures, many agencies are able to operate normally in parts of the country, even in some of the most prohibitive environments, when local solutions are adopted.

The situation in areas controlled by the Kurdish Regional Government does not warrant the measures currently taken by the UN agencies. While Refugees International was able to travel throughout the three northern governorates without a security apparatus, the UN is in security phase 4, with international staff unable to leave their compound without armored vehicles and armed personnel. Unable to travel to the field, the UN is in a very weak position to gather reliable data, assess needs and implement programs. Moreover, it is virtually impossible for Iraqis to access UN staff as entry to the fortified and well guarded UN compound is a long, invitation-only process.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ The U.S. and Iraqi governments acknowledge the gravity of the humanitarian situation inside Iraq and its impact on the civilian population. In particular, the U.S. must recognize that violence has led to unprecedented displacement and it must take the lead in addressing its consequences immediately.
- ❑ The U.S. and other donors fully fund the UNHCR 2007 appeal and commit to funding any future UNHCR, IOM, or joint UN appeal to respond to the growing humanitarian needs within Iraq.
- ❑ The UN declare a humanitarian emergency in Iraq and operate under the assumption that the national government is unable to protect and assist the Iraqi population.
- ❑ The UN Special Representative of the Secretary General in Iraq lead the way by establishing a joint UN strategy to address humanitarian needs, including agencies previously reluctant to acknowledge the extent of the emergency, such as UNICEF and WHO.
- ❑ UN agencies, as well as IOM, immediately start contingency planning and base their budgets on actual and expected needs given expected displacement levels, not on what agencies think they might be able to get from donors.
- ❑ OCHA start immediately putting together a joint appeal, and coordinate UN agencies' plans to respond to humanitarian needs.
- ❑ UNDSS review the security regulations imposed on UN staff in Iraq and relax them for the north. In other areas of Iraq, where many NGOs are able to function through local intermediaries, the UN consider adopting similar practices and coordinating with local authorities.

RI Advocate Kristele Younes, along with consultant Nir Rosen, assessed the internal displacement situation in northern Iraq in March.