Military-induced displacement

by Dina Abou Samra

Since the fall of the former government, Iraqis have primarily fled their homes because of sectarian and generalised violence. However, counter-insurgency operations by the US military and their Iraqi allies continue to be a significant cause of death, destruction and internal displacement in parts of Iraq.

Population displacements caused by armed clashes and military operations remain largely unreported by the media. Affected areas are often difficult to access. In addition, displacement by armed clashes and military operations has generally been assessed as a short-term phenomenon, while so called sectarian-induced displacement is viewed as a long-term trend.

In the months following the US invasion in 2003, military operations and armed clashes caused extensive devastation and displacement, particularly in western Iraq, in predominantly Sunni areas where insurgents were believed to be concentrated. The largest military operations-induced displacement occurred in Fallujah in November 2004 when the city was besieged for a second time and military operations and fighting forcibly displaced almost the entire population of the city (more than 200,000 people). In addition to Fallujah, several other cities and towns have been regularly targeted by military operations over the last four years, including Najaf, Kufa, Ramadi, Karabala, Tal Afar, Samarra, Basra and Baghdad. Across the country, small numbers of people living in what are evaluated to be strategic military areas have also been forcibly displaced by the multinational forces.

Figures from the UN and the Iraqi government estimate that in April 2007 22,400 people remained displaced as a result of military operations – the overwhelming majority in Anbar province. Military operations, often including aerial bombing, have been led by US-led forces with the stated aim of quelling armed insurgents. Military offensives have forced up to several hundred thousand people to flee

their homes. Most are able to move back when fighting lessens. However, in many cases people are afraid to go back because of ongoing insecurity, or because they have not received the compensation or reconstruction assistance necessary to restart their lives.

There has been limited media coverage but it is clear that in recent months military operations have intensified in Baghdad and Diyala province. In the first week of May US-led and Iraqi troops launched a major offensive in Diyala, forcing around 5,000 people to flee their homes. Military operations against suspected militants caused dozens of families to flee Sadr City, the main Shi'ite district of Baghdad. MNF-I and ISF military operations and movement restrictions also caused population displacements and prevented food from reaching displaced communities in Qadissiya province in April.

While military operations-related displacement has generally been short-term, there is cause for concern that, with rising intensity, military operations may increasingly contribute to longer-term displacement. The MNF-I is increasingly resorting to air strikes which lead to more and prolonged displacement as houses are more likely to be destroyed. Research also suggests that people displaced by military operations have been more likely to be displaced repeatedly, thereby increasing their vulnerability.[1]

Human rights violations

Access to internally displaced and other affected communities is often compromised by MNF-I and ISF operations including checkpoints and

movement restrictions. Humanitarian organisations working inside Iraq face a plethora of restrictions preventing them from assisting civilians during and in the aftermath of military operations. In March 2006 the Iraqi Red Crescent Society reported being refused access to the city of Samarra, leaving hundreds of civilians without medical assistance and food supplies. Food and water often do not reach affected populations for days, sometimes weeks, in the course of military operations and armed clashes. This causes immense suffering for families already living on the brink of poverty. Military operations have been accompanied by house-to-house searches and other measures such as the excessive use of force and arbitrary detention of men aged between 15 and 50 to prevent civilians from entering and leaving targeted areas. Families may not be provided with reasonable notice to be able to leave areas before attacks begin. For example, the closures of entry and exit points forced hundreds of families to stay inside their homes during air strikes on villages near the city of Baqubah in Diyala province, near the Iranian border in January 2007. US forces and Iraqi troops have also used hospitals and schools as military bases, in clear contravention of international humanitarian law, blocking access for civilians in affected areas.[2]

Iraqis may also be unable to access compensation for their losses. Multinational forces have been immune from the jurisdiction of Iraqi courts including in matters of liability for housing and land violations. In certain cases special compensation mechanisms have been created. For example, the Iraqi Central Committee for the Compensation of the People of Fallujah was created by the Iraqi government to compensate people whose homes and businesses were damaged during the offensive against insurgents in the city in November 2004. However, press reports suggest long delays in receiving compensation and that payments are often insufficient to cover the value and cost of rebuilding homes. Property

Abandoned ammunition store next to a football field, Basra.

CICR/SOHLBERG Johan

Iraq, there needs to be a greater adherence to humanitarian principles and a clear separation between humanitarian/civilian and military activities and actors.

Recommendations

- The UN should appoint a high-level UN Civil Military Coordinator with a civilian and humanitarian background in order to facilitate access to areas affected by military operations and advocate for greater respect of UN guidelines on civil-military coordination.

- In order to ensure the principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence, the UN must take immediate steps to move away from a reliance on the MNF-I.

- The UN can also play a more active role in promoting access and protection of populations in need by engaging in dialogue with all combatants, including non-state actors.

- The government of Iraq should support the efforts of the humanitarian community, including by facilitating the movement and the delivery of humanitarian assistance by non-military and neutral actors.

Dina Abou Samra (dina.abousamra@nrc.ch) is Middle East Country Analyst at the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (www.internal-displacement.org) of the Norwegian Refugee Council.

1. Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, 'Sectarian Violence: Radical Groups Drive Internal Displacement in Iraq', October 2006 www.brookings.edu/fp/projects/idp/20061018_DisplacementinIraq_Khalidi-Tanner.pdf
2. UN Human Rights Report, www.uniraq.org/aboutus/HR.asp
3. 'Coming to terms with the Humanitarian Imperative in Iraq', Humanitarian Agenda 2015 Briefing Paper, Feinstein International Center, Greg Hansen, January 2007, www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/(httpDocuments)/E41CF0D611D1C1257292005AB87F/$file/pdf_HA2015_Iraq_Briefing_Paper.pdf
4. www.uniraq.org
5. Strategic Framework for Humanitarian Action in Iraq, UN and partners, April 2007, p14, www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/(httpDocuments)/ECE544FA61A7C12572C200375BF5/$file/pdf_Strategic_Framework_for_Humanitarian_Action_in_Iraq.pdf

has also been allegedly damaged and stolen during MNF-I and ISF house raids. Compensation has been paid by the Iraqi government in some cases but the amount is generally less than the actual value of losses.

Confusing the humanitarian and military agenda

Private military companies (PMCs) operate extensively in Iraq, sometimes with highly sophisticated military means. Some 20,000 private security contractors are currently operating in Iraq, the second largest non-Iraqi military force. They, and other non-humanitarian actors, portray parts of their activities as humanitarian. In a critical review of the humanitarian response in Iraq, the Feinstein International Center (FIC) found that the Iraqi population does not distinguish clearly between the roles and activities of local and international actors, including military forces, political actors, commercial contractors, international NGOs and UN agencies.[3] PMCs affiliated with the MNF-I are

mistaken for humanitarian workers and there is a common perception that international organisations, including the UN and NGOs, are linked to the multinational forces. The UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI)[4] relies on multinational forces for mobility and security (as mandated under UN Security Council 1546). This reliance on one of the parties to the conflict has resulted in a blurring of humanitarian and military roles which undermines principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence. In its recent revised strategy, UN agencies and partners address the constraint of the UN reliance on MNF-I escorts and facilities for humanitarian work inside Iraq.[5]

As the new UN strategy recognises, the increased politicisation of humanitarian action in Iraq, where a range of actors – including the MNF-ISF, armed groups and political groups – is involved, is resulting in distribution of assistance often on the basis of political gain rather than need. In order to strengthen the humanitarian response in