

An unenviable task

by Abed Al-Samad Rahman Sultan

The Iraqi Ministry of Displacement and Migration (MoDM) is responsible for all matters related to migrants and refugees in Iraq, both Iraqis and non-Iraqis.

Displacement and forced migration in Iraq have a long history, particularly under the former regime. Displacement increased after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in April 2003 as a result of the breakdown in security and disappearance of the state's institutions. The situation worsened greatly with the escalation of terrorism, military operations to combat terrorism and the suicide attacks which have afflicted all parts of society – including the Ministry's employees – and which have left tens of thousands of families displaced inside and outside Iraq.

A pressing need emerged to establish a ministry to meet their needs, uphold their rights and coordinate humanitarian responses. Consequently, it was decided in August 2003 to establish the MoDM, a decision ratified by the Coalition Interim Authority in January 2004. Initially the ministry had few staff, a shortage of trained personnel and no opportunities for training. It was short of funds and lacked a planning department.

The ministry persevered, worked closely with such partners as

UNHCR and IOM, and managed to open offices in all of Iraq's governorates, apart from Kurdistan. We achieved positive results in our first year. Cooperation with UNHCR and neighbouring governments enabled the repatriation of thousands of refugees from Iran, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon.

We still have only 650 staff, including guards, yet we are responsible for a wide range of activities. These include: undertaking needs assessments; distribution of emergency relief; ensuring the provision of social security; remedying the impact of unjust laws which removed nationality from citizens; liaising with the Iraqi Property Dispute Authority; working with the Ministry of Human Rights to uphold the rights of displaced people; informing relatives as mass graves or those murdered by the previous regime are uncovered. The Baghdad office alone works with 70 local organisations. We also liaise with other countries – including Lebanon, Russia, Syria and the UK – regarding Iraqi citizens imprisoned as a result of illegal residence or border-crossing violations. We

offer some financial support for Palestinian refugees, using funds provided by UNHCR, and monitor their conditions. We work to settle the problem of statelessness affecting some residents of Kurdistan.

Our ministry, unlike others established when the state of Iraq was founded, is without any administrative legacy or institutional knowledge in the field of migration and displacement. It still needs to strengthen its capacities and to work with civil society. However, uncertainty continues as to the role this ministry could play in Iraq, even for individuals in the government itself. We are in urgent need of transfer of expertise, exchange of information and financial backing from our partners, for without this – and the commitment of the government – the ministry will be unable to adequately discharge its duties.

Iraq seeks the return of displaced families to their homes. This can only be done by enforcing the law and ensuring the security of Baghdad, for if we solve the problem in Baghdad this will to some extent solve the problem throughout the rest of Iraq.

It is important to recognise that it is difficult for Iraq to sustain and support a sudden and considerable

An Arab Iraqi family internally displaced to the north walks through the Kurdish neighbourhood where they now live.



rise in population numbers. Under the current circumstances, it is necessary to refrain from encouraging refugees outside Iraq to return and demand the restitution of their property. It is necessary to provide help to ensure there is shelter and lodging for those who return.

The problem of displacement in Iraq requires a concerted local, regional and international response. It is not simply the problem of Iraq and the Iraqis, for its effects transcend national borders.

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“The Government of Iraq embraces its duty towards its citizens wherever they are and we will not abandon them. Iraq has a great investment in our fellow country men and women whose hearts and minds are with us but who have had to leave their country behind. We need to stem the brain drain. Iraq once boasted world-class infrastructure including hospitals, universities, scientific institutions and an accomplished and dynamic middle class. We need to reaffirm national links with this strata of exiled society in order that they will return for the critical task of rebuilding the institutions, infrastructure and civil society of our country. The present situation of so many innocent uprooted Iraqis is an enormous challenge but

a symptom of the difficult transition our country is undergoing. It is also an indication of how the effects of instability in Iraq can spill over our borders. The situation thus reinforces the need for our country to be actively supported in good faith and it reminds the region, and the wider international community, why we all have a vested interest in helping achieve stability and peace in Iraq.”

Hoshyar Zebari, Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs, presentation to International Conference on Addressing the Humanitarian Needs of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons inside Iraq and in Neighbouring Countries, Geneva, April 2007