

A tragedy of increasing proportions: internal displacement in Iraq

by Walter Kälin

Almost two million Iraqis have been displaced within the borders of their own country, more than 700,000 of them in the past fourteen months. Reports indicate that internal displacement is continuing and that, unless peace and stability are restored soon, the number of IDPs will increase.

Iraqis are leaving their homes because of violence. According to interviews carried out by the International Organization for Migration, most IDPs said they fled their homes because of sectarian violence, generalised violence and military operations. Minority communities have been particularly at risk and are reported to have left their communities in substantial numbers. While many have sought safety in neighbouring countries – as is their right under international law – many are unwilling or unable to leave their country. As a recent study by the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement indicates, there are different patterns of displacement. In addition to people fleeing to areas where they feel safer, others remain at home but sleep in different places at night (night-time displacement), or do not go to work or school (pre-displacement) or become displaced more than once (repeat displacement).¹ Although systematic data are lacking, it is likely that those who are internally displaced are more vulnerable than refugees for the simple reason that IDPs are closer to the conflict which led to their displacement.

While governments hosting Iraqi refugees are certainly in need of support, the IDPs inside Iraq – though perhaps less ‘visible’ to those outside the country than the refugees in neighbouring countries – have clear needs which must be addressed. However, responding to IDPs is more difficult than for refugees where at least operational agencies have

access and donors are able to monitor implementation of programmes.

In other countries with large numbers of IDPs, international humanitarian agencies provide assistance until conditions change sufficiently for people to return to their homes. But Iraq is undoubtedly the worst place in the world right now for international humanitarian agencies to operate. Most agencies moved their international staff out of Iraq after the 2003 bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad. Assistance provided by coalition military and civilian forces is often viewed with suspicion. International and local humanitarian workers alike have been targeted by armed militias. Indeed the kidnapping of staff of the Iraqi Red Crescent led it to suspend its operations in Baghdad for about a month – at a time when it was providing assistance to almost a quarter of a million people. Local NGO staff are working valiantly to assist needy Iraqis but their ability to move around the communities they serve is increasingly restricted and they are short of funds. There is a very real danger that the vacuum in humanitarian assistance will be filled by armed militias who provide relief as a way of increasing their control over territory.

Living conditions for many, if not most, Iraqis are grim. In addition to the IDPs, the UN estimates that four million Iraqis lack food security. In 2006, one third of the population was found to be living in poverty. Unemployment is estimated to range

between 20 and 60%. Electricity and clean water are in short supply. Health services have been particularly hard hit as trained staff have been displaced and supplies are lacking. IDPs, uprooted from their communities and livelihoods, are experiencing particular difficulties and often find it impossible to access the public services which do exist.

Priorities for action

While the IDPs have many needs, I want to emphasise three priorities for action to protect those who are displaced within Iraq’s borders.

First, it is the responsibility of the national government – supported by the international community – to protect and assist its displaced citizens. The Ministry of Displacement and Migration, the Iraqi Red Crescent and a number of courageous Iraqi NGOs have worked hard to assist IDPs but problems persist. For example, there are reports of problems for IDPs to access the Public Distribution System (PDS) on which Iraqis rely for their daily food rations. In some cases, IDPs are told to return to their home communities to register for rations. Even when they are able to register, there may be delays of several months before their rations are distributed.

As a matter of urgency, I would encourage the Iraqi government to take the necessary steps to ensure that people who are displaced from their communities are able to receive food rations in the communities in which they are living. They should not be required to return to their place of origin to re-register for rations and provision should be made for displaced Iraqis who do not have the necessary documentation to have continued access to the PDS.

Secondly, there are reports that some governorates are restricting the entry of IDPs into their communities. While it is true that the arrival of large numbers of IDPs stretches available resources and can create tension with the host communities, I want to emphasise that the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement,² which were unanimously recognised by the September 2005 World Summit “as an important international framework for the protection of internally displaced persons”, provide for the freedom of movement of IDPs within a nation’s borders. People have a fundamental right to seek to escape violence by moving elsewhere within their country. Local authorities should consider ways of ensuring that IDPs are not impeded in their efforts to find security and protection within Iraq’s borders. At the same time, recognising the challenges which the arrival of IDPs pose to local governments, the Iraqi national authorities and the international community should find ways of increasing the capacity

of local authorities to respond to the needs of the IDPs and to relieve the pressures on public services in the host community. Local authorities need to be supported to provide for all those who are living within their jurisdiction, rather than turning away people who are desperately seeking safety.

Finally, most of the IDPs in Iraq are renting homes, living with family or friends, or living in abandoned buildings of one kind or another. Some face evictions, some are experiencing rising tensions with family and friends and many are threatened with homelessness. Many IDPs lack access to clean water and sanitation facilities. While most of Iraq’s governorates have set up

some kind of camps for IDPs, fewer than 1% of IDPs are living in them. Camps should be used only as a last resort. While IDP camps may have certain benefits – notably the ability to provide public services to displaced populations – they also have serious shortcomings. Most notably, given the reality of increasing sectarian violence in Iraq, moving IDPs into camps could give rise to security threats or scapegoating of IDPs who are conveniently grouped together. Camps are also expensive to build and to maintain and may create a dependency syndrome which can be difficult to overcome even when conditions improve. Furthermore, the experience to date with IDP camps in Iraq seems to indicate that



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camps are not culturally acceptable to most Iraqis and alternative possibilities should be supported.

By allowing IDPs to live within existing communities, their ties with the community are strengthened. Rather than devoting resources to maintaining camps, resources could be given to families to allow them to construct an additional room in their home for displaced family members. Communities could be supported to build semi-permanent structures for the displaced and to expand public services in the communities. Given housing shortages in Iraq, these structures could be put to good use in the reconstruction phase. For IDPs for whom living with family members is not an option, the

possibility of using non-essential public buildings as temporary shelters could be explored. However, if IDP camps are established, IDPs should not be coerced to live there, either by force or as a precondition for receiving assistance. Moreover, all displaced persons should be eligible for assistance and be given access to available services – even if they choose not to live in camps.

There are many challenges in responding to the needs of Iraq’s internally displaced persons. First, and foremost, ways and means to better protect the civilian population in Iraq against the threats of arbitrary displacement and ways to hold those responsible for such displacement

accountable should be found as a matter of urgency. But until the violence ends and people are able to return to their communities or find other durable solutions, the Iraqi government has the responsibility, as is spelled out in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement,

This young man and his family fled their home after a spate of kidnappings in their neighbourhood. They now live in northern Iraq where he supports them by working in a local bakery.

to ensure that those who were not able to escape forced displacement and remain in Iraq are protected and assisted. I hope that the international community, including UN agencies and NGOs, will focus their endeavours on the IDPs in Iraq and seek ways of strongly supporting the Iraqi government’s efforts in this regard.

Walter Kälin (walter.kaelin@oefre.unibe.ch) is the Representative of the UN Secretary-General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons.

1. Asraf al-Khalidi and Victor Tanner, ‘Sectarian Violence: Radical Groups Drive Internal Displacement in Iraq’ www.brookings.edu/printme.wbs?page=/fp/projects/idp/200610_displacementiniraq.htm
2. www.brook.edu/fp/projects/idp/gp_page.htm