

Insufficient world focus on Iraqi IDPs

by Peter Medway

The neglected humanitarian crisis of internal displacement requires a renewed commitment by donors and an immediate and robust intervention by the international community.

As Iraq news dominates the world media, it is all too easily forgotten that internal displacement is not new. Iraq has a history of forced migration that precedes the onset in 2003 of fighting between the Iraqi government, the US-led Multi-National Forces/Iraq and insurgent groups. Population flux actually began during the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88), during which civilians fled conflict or were forced to move within the country for other reasons, particularly as a result of Saddam Hussein's *anfal* campaign to relocate hundreds of thousand of rural Kurds. As a result of such disruptions, Iraq already contained pockets of displaced when multinational forces entered the country four years ago, sparking the most recent wave of movement and compounding what was already a significant problem.

Today all major population groups are affected by displacement. As armed groups intimidate Iraqis on the basis of sect or ethnicity, displaced families flee to areas where they can feel welcome. While some of the displaced come from agrarian backgrounds and have chosen to move back to rural areas to be near family, it is clear that Iraqi cities – where there are more services and sources of income – now host the majority of IDPs. However, even the most economically stable regions of Iraq offer few employment or educational opportunities to newcomers. With entire groupings being forcibly displaced into locations markedly defined and divided by sect, the International Medical Corps (IMC), one of the few international agencies to remain operational across the country, is particularly concerned about the increasing isolation of communities along sectarian lines and their resulting vulnerability to large-scale external threats.

Based on focus group discussions with thousands of families representing a wide range of socio-economic levels, religious beliefs and regions in Baghdad, as well as information acquired from community leaders, religious leaders, relevant members of Iraqi government organisations, and other observers, IMC estimates that as many as 200,000 more IDPs from the Baghdad governorate may flee during the course of the next few months. The effects of this crisis on education, livelihoods and freedom of movement for the entire population will be devastating.

Funding constraints

Resources currently available to address this crisis are inadequate. Relief agencies operating in Iraq face severe funding constraints for the coming year and will not be able to fully respond to humanitarian needs. The recently announced UNOCHA-managed NGO Humanitarian Response Fund is welcomed but at \$5 million is too small. Setting the size of each grant at \$100,000 is short-sighted and does not account for the high transaction costs of operating in highly insecure environments. In any case, at the time of writing the Fund has not been fully supported and is not yet able to disburse funds to agencies operational inside Iraq.

It may be a legitimate development strategy for the international donor community to target its assistance at the Iraqi government. However, in the current circumstances this, alone, may not necessarily be the best way to rapidly respond to the IDP crisis. IMC and other NGO teams on the ground note that the government's capacity to deliver assistance in a

timely, needs-based fashion requires hands-on support in many areas. Operational NGOs currently in Iraq are in a position to partner with local institutions to meet needs but are constrained by the reluctance of donors to provide sufficient resources.

A fundamental reassessment of the international agenda for Iraqi governance around the issue of humanitarian assistance is required. It is all well and good to support government capacity from the top down but international assistance should also aim to address the needs of Iraqi service providers at the grassroots level.

Massive displacement is stretching the already fragile economic and social fabric of countless Iraqi communities. IMC calls on the international community to plan humanitarian interventions which recognise that:

- Unlike previous waves of displacement, many Iraqis now fleeing their homes and livelihoods do not plan to return but hope to build new lives in their host communities.
- Short-term emergency interventions will not be sufficient: any lasting solution must be comprehensive and include conflict resolution efforts and support for host communities and for IDPs.
- Access to health services is increasingly difficult for IDPs: the loss of health care professionals due to the risks to personal safety must be addressed.
- Action is needed to prevent food insecurity and malnutrition, particularly if the Public Distribution System is further disrupted.
- Coordination mechanisms and the capacity of responsible government ministries such as

the Ministry of Displacement and Migration need to be strengthened.

- Shelter strategies must be put into place as the number of IDPs increases: host communities alone will no longer be able to absorb IDPs in existing homes and public buildings.
- Employment opportunities must become a major focus of a response to the needs of IDPs and to communities as a whole.

- The forced return of IDPs to their original homes in neighbourhoods or areas dominated by members of other sects could spur additional violence and a new wave of displacement. Reintegration remains a valuable political goal but IDPs should not be returned to their place of origin without mechanisms in place to ensure their safety and protection from potential harm and abuse.

The phrase 'humanitarian crisis' may be often over-used but it does accurately describe

conditions unfolding inside Iraq. Without a comprehensive large-scale intervention, the risk of regional destabilisation is real. Support for Iraq's growing IDP population must be robust and geographically widespread to anticipate and ease burdens on struggling host populations and on the stressed infrastructure.

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