

UN's role in Iraq

by Ashraf Jehangir Qazi

The UN Country Team and NGO humanitarian assistance to Iraq have so far averted a full-scale breakdown in basic social services. Major disease outbreaks have been avoided and health and education campaigns are being delivered to millions of citizens in partnership with Iraq's government and civil society. Delivery of potable water, emergency food rations, medical supplies and non-food items have provided temporary relief to IDPs and vulnerable neighbourhoods. However, these gains are at risk without additional investment from the Government of Iraq (GoI), as well as the international humanitarian community, to ensure that Iraq's Public Distribution System, healthcare, education, and water and sanitation systems keep functioning.

The scope of the required humanitarian response appears to be beyond the GoI's immediate capacity, and therefore requires sufficient support from the humanitarian community to ensure an immediate response to Iraq's growing humanitarian needs.

Lack of humanitarian space

In order to deliver assistance, a conducive operational environment must be created. As the violence has escalated the humanitarian space has all but evaporated, catching the population in a double jeopardy: just as needs have spiralled, assistance has all but been suspended from most sources. The UN's ability to effectively respond to the crisis has been compromised by the severely constrained humanitarian space and by security parameters, which have led to strong perceptions of lack of neutrality and impartiality of the UN in Iraq. As a result of lack of humanitarian space, the UN has had to resort largely to remote management, with implementation through NGO partners, community structures, as well as governmental partners. Current operations are managed from Jordan and Kuwait, and any larger-scale response could require additional regional

presence. Modalities assumed for development activities can be adapted for delivery of aid, data gathering and implementation of projects. There is a need for greater centralisation of information management to ensure data consistency and credibility, and facilitate appropriate planning and monitoring of the response.

Appropriate resources

Three years ago it was thought that Iraq was on the road to recovery and development. This was reflected in the creation and mandate of the International Reconstruction Fund Facility for Iraq (IRFFI)¹, which is primarily a development fund and, as such, not an appropriate or effective mechanism for funding humanitarian projects. Therefore, a separate rapid response funding mechanism is needed.

In the past, Iraq was a donor country itself, and it is largely perceived as a wealthy country. Donors therefore are reluctant to add funding for humanitarian assistance to the funds already allocated to Iraq, possibly preferring instead to channel resources to other humanitarian situations suffering from lack of funds. Regardless of what resources may be at the disposal of the GoI, it lacks the capacity to plan the programming of those resources to address the needs of its population. Therefore, the international humanitarian community requires donor investment in order to meet the immediate and overwhelming needs, in order to provide immediate relief to Iraqis, as well as to provide the necessary support to enhance the GoI's efforts.

Due to the overwhelming need for assistance and the inability of the GoI or the humanitarian community to meet it, armed groups and community leaders (political, religious and/or tribal) have begun to fill the void with their own form of social welfare. While such initiatives address some of the immediate basic needs of parts of the population,

albeit in a sectarian manner, they carry long-term implications. In particular, assistance provided by armed groups may serve to increase their profile and influence among communities, thus further reducing the possibility for future neutral humanitarian space in Iraq.

Access and security

While the UN appreciates the assistance the Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I) have provided for transportation and security inside Iraq, the UN cannot be perceived as neutral, as a result. Neutrality is essential for humanitarian operations, and therefore the UN needs to identify independent means of travel that meet security parameters, while affording the degree of access necessary for its activities.

The current UN country team has been providing assistance to the GoI and Iraqis since 2003, despite the constraints imposed by the situation. Working through its national staff members based inside Iraq, the UN has also established functional networks with national partners country-wide, making it possible to consider delivery of assistance in Iraq.

Work is in progress to reinforce operational partnerships with the UNCT and NGOs through shared information management systems, increased coordination and strengthened partnership capacity. International and national NGOs continue to operate inside Iraq and are tested partners in the delivery of immediate humanitarian assistance. However, these NGOs need financial support if their presence and operations are to be maintained. It is also necessary for future assistance activities to identify local actors as a means to provide relief and humanitarian assistance to the most affected and vulnerable Iraqi populations.

The UN will continue to work with the GoI to jointly provide assistance to the most affected Iraqi

populations. However, as the scope of the humanitarian crisis is beyond the current response capacity of the GoI, the UN will increase its current humanitarian activities to match the increasing needs where possible. To that end, the UN is committed to working directly with governorates, districts and community leaders, to ensure that interventions are tailored to the unique circumstances in each district.

On a regional level, the humanitarian crisis has implications in terms of outflow, security and access to vulnerable groups. Therefore neighbouring countries and their NGO communities should be engaged and included in determinations of responses. Humanitarian corridors between these countries need to be developed and preliminary discussions regarding coordination

between sister UN agencies in these countries have begun.

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The web portal for UN agencies working in Iraq is at www.uniraq.org

1. www.irffi.org