

Responding to Iraq's ever-deepening violence

by Robert Zimmerman

Civilians bear the brunt of Iraq's relentless violence. Appalling daily casualties that would be considered unacceptable elsewhere have become routine. The country is confronted with a grave failure to ensure respect and protection for the lives and dignity of millions of civilians not taking part in the ongoing violence.

Since the bomb attacks on the UN office and the delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in August and October 2003 respectively, the ICRC has been one of the few international humanitarian organisations with a permanent operational presence in central, southern and northern parts of Iraq.

The Iraqi Red Crescent Society (IRCS) – with whom the ICRC works closely, especially in the fields of restoring family links and emergency relief response – estimates that approximately 106,000 families have been newly displaced within the country since February 2006. Two thirds are women and children, often living in female-headed households. Thousands of Iraqis continue to be forced out of their homes owing to military operations, general poor security and economic hardship. And the outlook is bleak, particularly

in Baghdad and other areas with mixed communities, where the situation is likely to worsen.

Fleeing the fighting or sectarian violence is often a decision of last resort taken by individuals and families seeking to improve their security. They must receive assistance to meet their basic needs once they have done so. Most of them take refuge with host families, who often struggle to cope with the additional burden on their limited resources. Some find refuge in camps, public buildings and abandoned military barracks. Frequently, both the displaced families and the communities hosting them are badly in need of shelter materials, access to clean water, adequate sanitation, food and other essentials. In 2006, more than four million people benefited from water and sanitation infrastructure projects developed by the ICRC and 69 primary health care

centres benefited from rehabilitation works. Twenty main hospitals received medical and surgical kits for the treatment of wounded patients. In partnership with the IRCS, more than 227,000 people in various locations, mostly displaced families, received food aid and more than 161,000 people received household kits. The ICRC and the IRCS are now planning to increase their distribution of food and other essential items to reach about 660,000 vulnerable people.

Groups of internally displaced have a major impact on host communities, and the ICRC therefore takes care to balance its assistance for IDPs with complementary support for the resident populations among whom they have taken refuge. As a matter of principle, the ICRC does not distinguish between categories of victims of an armed conflict so as to avoid neglecting those not belonging to one or another category. This is more true in Iraq than anywhere else due to the mixing of IDPs with the resident population. However, in conformity with its commitment to impartiality, the ICRC concentrates its efforts on the most vulnerable, who often include IDPs. Assistance must then be extended in such a

manner that it does not create new tensions and possible violence.

In addition to benefiting all those in need, assistance must be extended by neutral humanitarian actors independent from armed groups or any of the parties to the conflict. Being associated with one or the other party – or being perceived as such – may represent new threats for the beneficiaries themselves. The needs are huge and the ICRC seeks therefore

dignity and basic humanitarian principles repeatedly expressed and shown on the ground has reached unprecedented peaks. The protection of all segments of the civilian population and of people deprived of their liberty remains, however, the ICRC's main priority in Iraq where people not or no longer participating in the hostilities continue to be the main victims of repeated violations of international humanitarian law. The protection problems in Iraq are

families often need help to locate loved ones and restore contact.

Persons held by the multinational forces or the Kurdish regional government are regularly visited by the ICRC to assess their conditions of detention and treatment. Findings and recommendations are shared in a confidential manner with the responsible authorities in order to seek the required improvements. The ICRC helps families visit relatives

ICRC collaborates with the Iraqi Red Crescent to enable Iraqis to contact their displaced relatives.



ICRC/GASSMANN Thierry

to work in a coordinated manner with other humanitarian players.

Improving protection for the civilian population in Iraq must be the priority as to prevent displacement. It is a huge challenge due to the intensity of the violence and the insecurity affecting humanitarian actors themselves, to the multiplicity of actors involved and to the difficulty of identifying and developing contacts with armed groups and all parties to the conflict. The blatant disregard for human

numerous and complex. The ICRC is aware that its contribution to solving them remains unfortunately a drop in the ocean in regard of the needs.

The conflict has torn apart many families, with relatives being detained or fleeing their homes to seek safety elsewhere in Iraq or outside the country. Many families remain without news of relatives who went missing during past conflicts or the current hostilities. Dispersed members of

detained at different internment facilities run by the multinational forces otherwise unable to afford long and expensive trips.

Medical-legal facilities are struggling to cope with the rising influx of bodies, contending with insufficient capacity to store them properly or to systematically gather data on unidentified bodies in order to allow families to be informed of a relative's death. In 2006, an estimated 100 civilians were killed every day. Half of them remained unclaimed or

unidentified. The ICRC is assisting these facilities with material support and training in order to allow them to increase considerably their capacity.

“You’re lucky if you get a warning to leave your home. If you do, it means at least you have a chance to survive. You must be ready to flee your place any moment.”

An ICRC employee in Baghdad

The humanitarian situation is steadily worsening and it is affecting,

directly or indirectly, all Iraqis. Protecting Iraq’s civilian population must be a priority, and the ICRC urgently calls for better respect for international humanitarian law. It appeals to all those with military or political influence on the ground to act now to ensure that the lives of ordinary Iraqis are spared and protected. This is an obligation under international humanitarian law for both states and non-state actors.

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the Central Tracing Agency and Protection Division at ICRC. For further information about the ICRC’s Iraq programme, see: www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/iraq!Open. For more information about the Iraqi Red Crescent see the article on pages 48–49.

For more on ICRC’s role in IDP protection, see Alain Aeschlimann, ‘Protection of IDPs: an ICRC view’ FMR October 2005 supplement. www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR24/IDP%20Supplement/11.pdf