



www.rsc.ox.ac.uk

Refugee Studies Centre,
Queen Elizabeth House,
21 St Giles, Oxford OX1 3LA, UK.
Tel: +44 (0)1865 270722.
Fax: +44 (0)1865 270721.
Email: rsc@qeh.ox.ac.uk

'Operation Iraqi Freedom' and its phantom million Iraqi refugees

by Dawn Chatty

On November 2002 the UN Security Council voted unanimously to back an Anglo-American resolution (no. 1441) requiring Iraq to reinstate weapons inspectors withdrawn by the UN in 1998. The following month, as demanded by the UN, Iraqi officials presented the UN with a 12,000 page document disclosing Iraq's programmes for weapons of mass destruction. On 5 March 2003, after months of intense diplomatic efforts, the foreign ministers of France, Russia and Germany issued a joint declaration stating that they would not permit a second resolution to pass the UN Security Council to authorise military action against Iraq. The US and the UK abandoned hope of gaining Security Council support for launching a war on Iraq. On 20 March, the US launched its first set of air strikes on Baghdad and 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' was officially underway.

Throughout the period between November 2002 and March 2003 there had been estimates that such a military engagement would cause displacement of more than a million people within Iraq and across its borders.

UNHCR and numerous NGOs had made preparations to receive this wave of humanity in Jordan, Syria and Iran. In Syria, UNHCR negotiated the upgrading of the El Hol campsite in eastern Syria and two additional campsites were agreed to with the Syrian government at Al Yarubiyah and Al Tanf border crossing. UNHCR pre-positioned non-food items sufficient for 5,000 people in the country with additional items available for transfer from the Turkish port of Iskenderun or the Jordanian port of Aqaba in a matter of hours. In Jordan, UNHCR worked closely with the Hashemite Charitable Society to set

up a refugee site near Ruwaishid in eastern Jordan. In addition, UNHCR stockpiled relief items at the southern port of Aqaba for immediate dispatch to Ruwaishid, should that prove necessary. In Iran, the government's Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants prepared ten campsites with the help of UNHCR. Four of these sites were provided with basic facilities such as sanitation and water services and could initially host 60,000 refugees.

Despite the dire predictions, no Iraqi refugees crossed the border into Iran. Up to 30,000 Iraqis, however, gathered near the border at Badrah in eastern Iraq and requested help from Iran. Iranian authorities responded by sending food, water and medicine to the border where they requested that Iraqi elders take charge of distributing the relief items. In Syria just over 200 Iraqis crossed the border and took refuge at El Hol camp. Perhaps as a response to US warnings that no sanctuary should be given to any Iraqi government loyalists, 44 Iraqi refugees, including 23 children, were later removed from the El Hol camp and transported back to Iraq. This group of refugees were all residents of Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's birthplace.

In Jordan, more than 1,200 refugees arrived at the Al-Karma border crossing between Iraq and Jordan and found themselves trapped, unable to cross over into Jordan and unwilling to go back into Iraq. These were mainly third country nationals trapped in a 'no-man's land': Iranian Kurds, Iranian Persians, Arabs and Palestinians. Two months after 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' had begun, some 550 Palestinians and a few hundred other Arab refugees were allowed entry into the Jordanian refugee camp at Ruwaishid.

How did the international humanitarian aid community get it so wrong? How were the estimates of 1 million refugees calculated and why were the figures so readily accepted?

We now know that inside Iraq some 300,000 people were displaced by the

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war, mainly Arabs who had recently been forced by Saddam Hussein's regime to settle in Kurdish villages surrounding the northern Iraqi town of Kirkuk. Relatively few people sought refuge across international borders and those who did were mainly nationals of other countries who were resident in Iraq.

Perhaps the fundamental error was in assuming that Iraqi citizens would flee their homes once the Anglo-American military attacks began. For most Iraqis, 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' was not regarded as a liberation campaign but as a neo-colonial assault on their homeland. Most Iraqis preferred to stand their ground and, by sheltering among familiar neighbours and kin, safeguard their holdings while affirming their Iraqi-ness. The Western assumption that Iraqis might flee across international borders for their personal safety and later return to recover their property and possessions was not one that many Iraqis, or Arabs for that matter, would make. The lessons of Palestine have been deeply engrained in the Arab psyche. If you flee war in your homeland, you may not be allowed to return when fighting ends

Dawn Chatty is the RSC's Deputy Director.

Email: dawn.chatty@qeh.ox.ac.uk

Kabul kids

by Jason Hart

Few places evoke images of destruction and suffering created by war more strongly than Kabul. Kabul's children have featured in news reports and aid agency appeals to illustrate the devastation and displacement wrought by more than two decades of armed conflict. It might be assumed that many young people are traumatised by their experiences and now require the care of mental health professionals in order to begin rebuilding their lives. A study just published by Save the Children USA and UNICEF challenges this assumption and encourages us to reflect on established approaches to working with war-affected children.

The Children of Kabul: discussions with Afghan families is the product of six months' intensive research with more than 600 residents of Kabul, nearly 450 of whom were aged 7-18. The scale and duration of this research project set it apart from the majority of assessment exercises undertaken by humanitarian organisations working with war-affected children. It is methodologically innovative. Researchers did not focus on conflict-related events and their consequences for children's mental health but adopted a broader approach: an exploration of children's social relationships and well-being in light of a range of problems and challenges including, but not limited to, those created directly by conflict and displacement. Children were involved in research design, commenting on their lives and analysing their circumstances. The children emerge from the report as survivors actively engaged in the daily struggles of life, rather than victims who require 'expert' analysis and help.

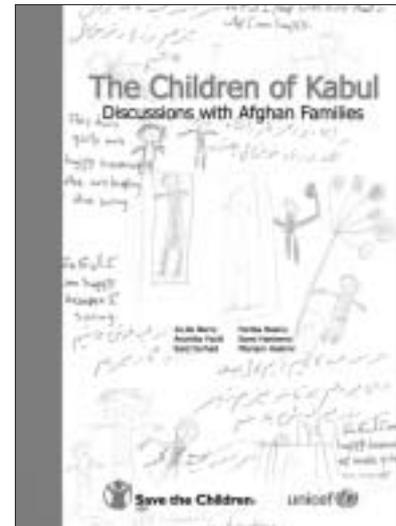
A central research finding is the overriding concern with the material and social consequences of war and displacement. Inevitably this includes poverty which, in turn, affects children's responsibilities, nutrition, ability to play, family relationships and access to health care. Destruction of basic infrastructure has greatly hindered many aspects of children's daily lives including the undertaking of tasks such as collecting water and firewood. The numerous destroyed

buildings – and the ghosts believed to haunt them – are a significant cause of fear. Alongside the challenges created directly by war and displacement, concerns about everyday matters similar to those experienced by young people around the world are also clearly expressed. These include teacher discipline, the sickness or death of relatives, romantic problems and gender discrimination.

Perhaps the most startling and salutary finding, however, is the extent of children's concern about conditions that have come about as a result of the supposed peace. The clearest example of this is traffic. With the fall of the Taliban came a massive increase in the number of vehicles on the streets of Kabul, a sudden and fearsome development for children and a direct threat to their physical safety.

The authors conclude that "...a child is much more likely to be preoccupied with the difficulties of crossing a mine field to fetch water today, than remembering an experience of fighting which happened several years ago." The implications of this study for the work of humanitarian agencies are significant. Given the range of concerns expressed, a multi-faceted response seems essential: one that focuses principally on helping children overcome diverse problems in their current lives. Save the Children USA and UNICEF are presently engaged in developing such a response, which includes a project to improve road safety, provide play and leisure opportunities and support healing practices in keeping with local religious belief and popular sentiment.

In other parts of the world affected by conflict, a fairly standardised, trauma-focused response continues to be promoted by many agencies. The Children of Kabul project illustrates the importance of devoting serious efforts to the study of local context and to working with children towards an holistic response that addresses directly their particular experiences, concerns and aspirations.



Jason Hart is an RSC Research Officer. Email: jason.hart@qeh.ox.ac.uk

The full text of *The Children of Kabul* is online at: www.savethechildren.org/pdf_publications/ChildrenofKabul.pdf

RSC Announcements

Voices out of Conflict: young people affected by forced migration and political crisis

Cumberland Lodge, Windsor Great Park, UK : 26-28 March 2004
[see page 58 for details]

RSC Southeast Asia Regional School in Forced Migration

8-18 December 2003 : Bangkok, Thailand

RSC International Summer School in Forced Migration 2004

5-23 July 2004 : Oxford, UK

Forced Migration Online
www.forcedmigration.org

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