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'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voted unanimously to back an Anglo-American resolution (no. 1441) requiring Iraq to reinstate weapons inspectors withdrawn by the UN in 1998.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

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