

Iraq's neglected humanitarian crisis

by Andrew Harper

Over three million Iraqis are currently internally displaced or have left Iraq, with possibly one million of these having been displaced since the February 2006 Samarra bombings. Refugees, IDPs and host communities have exhausted their resources. Donors are unresponsive to their needs and governments oblivious to the likely secondary displacement to Europe and further afield.

Iraq is haemorrhaging, with no end in sight to the massive and escalating displacement in the face of extreme violence. The security, political, social and financial impact on Iraq, the region and the rest of the world will be felt for many years. Addressing the Iraqi displacement is a massive and long-term challenge to the stability of the entire Middle East.

We are witnessing the largest long-term population movement in the Middle East since Palestinians were displaced following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Around one in eight Iraqis is displaced. The international community has provided billions of dollars in funding for recovery and development programmes for Iraq¹ – many of which have not been implemented because of security concerns – yet humanitarian needs inside Iraq and in neighbouring states remain grossly neglected. UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies lack the funds required to cope with the growing numbers of displaced and increasingly desperate Iraqis needing help both within and outside their country.

Obtaining accurate IDP and refugee statistics is fraught with difficulty due to the politicised nature of displacement. Often IDPs see little reason to register. Reporting is often erratic and confined to areas under

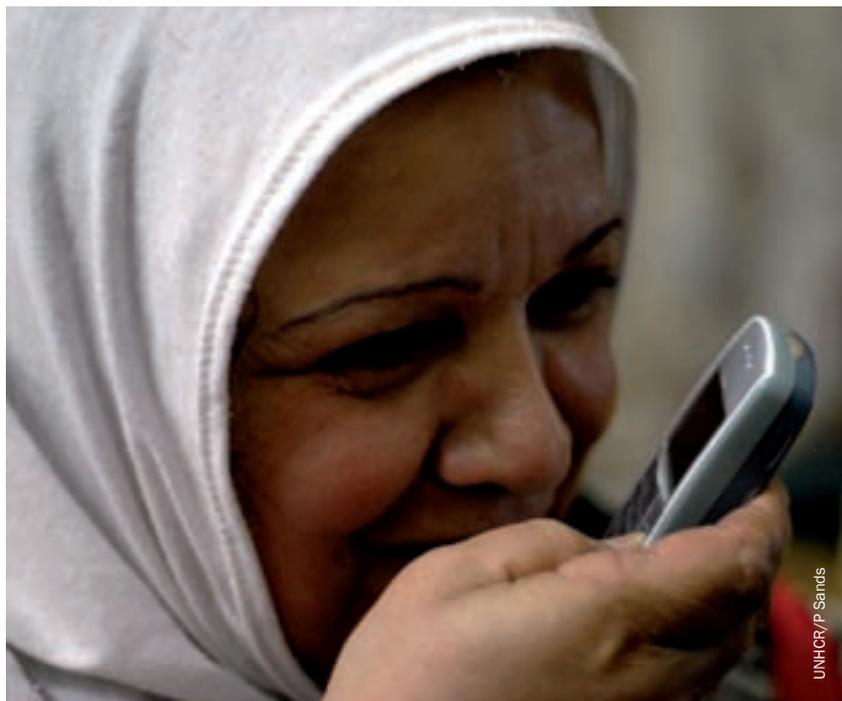
Many were displaced prior to 2003 but increasing numbers are fleeing now. UNHCR believes that some 425,000 Iraqis have fled their homes for other areas inside Iraq this year and that internal displacement is continuing at a rate of some 40,000 to 50,000 a month. A recent report from the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement² chronicles the sharp rise in displacement since the bombing of the Shi'a shrine in Samarra's Golden Mosque in February 2006. Ongoing sectarian attacks, abductions, kidnappings, killings and criminal extortion are

transforming the social and demographic make-up of urban Iraq, fragmenting the country along religious and ethnic lines. The violence is now reminiscent of the dynamics of sectarian violence and ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, the Great Lakes, the Caucasus, Sudan and other great human rights disasters of the past 15 years.

Baghdad is breaking up into militia-controlled neighbourhoods.

The worst slaughter is happening in the towns on the outskirts of Baghdad where Sunnis and Shi'as live side by side. Displaced Sunni Arabs from Shi'a majority areas are the IDP group that has grown most dramatically in 2006. Shi'a from majority Sunni areas have been under pressure since before the fall of Saddam's regime. In addition there are members of religious and ethnic minority groups who are specifically targeted. These include:

An Iraqi refugee woman speaks to her son living in Baghdad from her temporary quarters in Amman, December 2006.



government control. Sectarian, ethnic and tribal groups may overstate numbers to strengthen their claims to power and resources. As neighbouring governments attempt to restrict escape routes, it is hard to quantify the numbers leaving Iraq.

Scale of internal displacement

UNHCR estimates there are at least 1.6 million Iraqis displaced internally.

Assyrians, Chaldean, Armenian and Catholic sects; Palestinians; Sabeen Mandean; Turkmen; Kurds; Yazidis, Jews and other minorities. Christians and Kurds are often being targeted on suspicion of supporting the government. Individuals who had been members of or associates of the former Ba'ath regime are subject to attacks by Shi'ite extremists. Both Sunni and Shi'a have little confidence in the government's ability to protect them and voices of moderation are lacking. Most of those displaced have little expectation of being able to return home. Brookings-Bern research suggests hundreds of thousands more are teetering on the edge of displacement in Baghdad and Basra and mixed Sunni-Shi'a areas. Violence along the fault line between Arab and Kurdish Iraq, such as in Mosul or in the oil-rich and strategically important region of Kirkuk, is likely to worsen and cause even greater displacement.

Women are particularly affected by security-driven constraints restricting movement, education and livelihood activities. Women are increasingly pressurised to conform to fundamentalist religious norms of dress and conduct. They are vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) from militias, Islamic extremists and opportunistic criminals.

WFP estimates that at least 4 million Iraqis are food insecure with another 8.3 million dependent on the official state food distribution system for basic supplies. If the food and water supply systems break down we can expect hundreds of thousands more to be displaced. Increased targeting of teachers, professors and students, particularly in Baghdad and Mosul, has been the trigger for many families to move. In several governorates the resources of host communities have been exhausted. Disturbingly, the Governorate of Karbala recently stopped accepting new IDPs due to the strains they place on existing infrastructure and social services.

Iraqis abroad

UNHCR estimates that there are some two million Iraqis in neighbouring states. There may be between 650,000 to a million displaced Iraqis in both Syria and Jordan, with lesser numbers in Egypt, Lebanon and Iran. UNHCR believes that up to 2-3,000 leave Iraq each day, the vast majority to Syria but also to Jordan, Turkey and the Gulf States. Iraqis are reporting that it is increasingly difficult to

that situation has changed and many refugees are no longer able to look after themselves. Their legal situation is ambiguous. They have access to Syrian public schools and healthcare but have to travel out of the country every six months to renew their visas. They cannot hold work permits. Most Iraqi professionals – including doctors, university professors and businessmen – found it relatively easy to obtain Jordanian residency permits. However, hundreds of thousands of other Iraqis have only been given three-month tourist visas which have to be renewed by exiting and re-entering the country or else paying a fine of \$2 for each day overstayed. Most lack funds to do so and it is believed there are now more than 400,000 illegal Iraqis living in Jordan. Iraqis are mostly found in the highly populated cities of Amman, Zarqa and Irbid. Many Iraqis apparently fear sending their children to be vaccinated at government-run health centres or attend public schools lest they be identified as illegal residents and deported. More worrying are reports that many vulnerable Iraqis who have been the subject of assault, sexual abuse or robbery are unwilling to report these incidents.

UNHCR and other UN agencies are concerned about the increasing credible reports of vulnerable Iraqi women and girls being trafficked into

the sex trade, particularly in Syria and a number of the Gulf States. For some households this is their sole source of income. The Women's Freedom NGO estimates that nearly 3,500 Iraqi women have gone missing since the US-led occupation of Iraq began in 2003. It estimates that a quarter have been trafficked abroad since the start of 2006, many unaware of their fate. UNHCR offices have activities to provide protection and support to survivors of SGBV – including an increasing number of women and children suffering from domestic violence – but funding for many programmes has been cut. In at least one country UNHCR can only afford to place survivors of



UNHCR/P. Sands

enter Jordan and on a number of occasions the border has been closed. Should the borders be closed then the international community may be faced with a potential humanitarian catastrophe in attempting to provide emergency assistance to tens of thousands in an insecure, hostile and remote location. Unfortunately, due to the lack of practical protection or assistance that UNHCR can offer in the region, most Iraqis do not register with the agency when they do enter neighbouring states.

When Iraqis first arrived in Damascus and Amman most brought resources with them and many were not in need of assistance. Several years on,

An Iraqi woman sells cigarettes on a central Amman street to make ends meet. December 2006.

SGBV in a 'safe house' for three days before they are required to look for alternative accommodation – which, in most cases, means going back to the perpetrators of the violence.

The situation of Palestinian refugees inside Iraq and in neighbouring countries is particularly desperate. Many of the 34,000-strong Palestinian community in Iraq who had been living in the country since 1948 and have known no other home are believed to have fled Iraq. Stereotyped as supporters of Saddam Hussein, and prime candidates for the insurgency, many today face harassment, threats of deportation, media scapegoating, arbitrary detention, torture and murder.³ Despite the difficulties in leaving Iraq UNHCR believes that the Palestinian population in Iraq may have decreased to 10-15,000. Some Palestinians trapped in the no-man's land between Iraq and Jordan are facing their fourth winter in the scorpion-infested desert site. The level of despair is acute. Some have harmed themselves and gone on hunger strike. It is critical that neighbouring states and resettlement countries provide an urgent, humane solution for those Palestinians remaining in Iraq or trapped at its borders before more are kidnapped, raped or killed.

Thousands of Iraqi refugees are now moving beyond the region, including to Europe. Statistics received from 36 industrialised countries for the first six months of 2006 showed a 50% increase in Iraqi asylum claims over the same period a year ago. Sweden, the UK, France, Egypt and Malaysia are among countries reporting up to a five-fold increase in the number of Iraqi asylum seekers compared to 2005 levels.

Funding crisis

Displacement and ongoing violence present a daunting humanitarian challenge and extreme hardship for both the displaced and the Iraqi families trying to help them in host communities. The enormous scale of the needs, the ongoing violence and the difficulties in reaching the displaced make it a problem that is practically beyond the capacity of humanitarian agencies, including UNHCR.

UNHCR is now facing a far larger humanitarian crisis than we initially prepared for in 2002-2003 but with far fewer resources. Prior to the Coalition invasion we prepared a budget of \$154 million to respond to a possible exodus of up to 600,000 refugees. Since then, donations to UNHCR's Iraq programme have plummeted despite the ever-increasing numbers of displaced people.

The international community remains fixated on the unquenchable violence and sterile debates about whether Iraq fits the definition of a 'civil war'. This diverts attention from the consequences and humanitarian impact of this tragic chapter in Iraq's history. Rather than focusing on the daily indicator of numbers killed, we need to look at what each death means to the remaining family members or to the minority communities from which they originated. How many single mothers have been left behind? How many orphans? How many wounded, sick or elderly are now completely destitute? Whether the number killed since 2003 is merely 50,000, or the 655,000 cited in a recent Lancet/John Hopkins University report,⁴ it is still a catastrophic situation.

Much of our work in the three years since the fall of the previous regime was based on the assumption that the domestic situation would stabilise and hundreds of thousands of previously displaced Iraqis would be able to go home. Instead, displacement has risen to unprecedented levels. Today, we are faced by the needs of hundreds of thousands more displaced people than we planned for in 2002-2003 but only have a \$29 million budget that is only about 60% funded. We are suspending a number of crucial activities for single mothers and elderly Iraqi refugees. The UNHCR Damascus office requested an overall 2006 budget of \$1.3m but got only \$700,000. This amounts to less than \$1 per Iraqi refugee per year, not including the agency's operating costs and its expenditure on non-Iraqi refugees.

Iraq has seen the largest and most recent displacement of any UNHCR operation in the world, yet even as more Iraqis are displaced and their needs increase the funds to

help them are decreasing. This growing humanitarian crisis appears to have slipped off the radar screen of most donors.

The co-chair of the Iraq Study Group⁵ – the bi-partisan expert group set up by the US Congress to consider options for US Iraq policy – noted that the cost of the US intervention has reached \$400 billion and that the total price tag could rise to a trillion dollars. A tiny fraction of this sum would enable states neighbouring Iraq to keep their borders open and to maintain the generous hospitality and temporary protection they have offered. Countries beyond the immediate region must help carry the humanitarian burden and prevent the creation of a new long-term displaced population which could, if unchecked, parallel the Palestinian diaspora. In responding to the Iraqi displacement crisis the international community needs to also recognise the continuing anxiety and focus of the Arab world with regard to the millions of Palestinians whom they continue to accommodate. The situation in Iraq is getting worse and there is no prospect for IDPs or refugees to return. The time to do something is now. UNHCR needs donor countries to extend their funding of the Iraq regional programme to an initial budget of \$38.5m for 2007. Even if that figure is achieved it may be too little too late to help rebuild the lives of many Iraqis.

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This article is written in a personal capacity, and does not necessarily represent the views of the United Nations.

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1. The USA reports it has provided over \$5bn of humanitarian assistance to Iraq, including tens of millions of dollars to IDP programmes. USAID Iraq. 'Success Stories' November 2006 www.usaid.gov/iraq/updates/nov06/iraq_fs01_110106.pdf

2. www.brook.edu/fp/projects/idp/20061018_DisplacementinIraq_Khalidi-Tanner.pdf

3. See G Wengert and M Alfaro 'Can Palestinian refugees in Iraq find protection?', FMR26 www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR26/FMR2609.pdf

4. www.thelancet.com/webfiles/images/journals/lancet/s0140673606694919.pdf

5. www.usip.org/isg