

Iraq: dilemmas in contingency planning

by Clare Graham

The crisis in Iraq exemplifies the dilemmas inherent in contingency planning that face today's humanitarian community.

This article asks: if contingency planning is both standard practice and an intrinsic duty of humanitarian agencies, what were the sources of tension over preparing for an Iraqi crisis and what are the implications for any effective response?

Participation in a controversial crisis?

Although contingency planning should be an integral part of the work of any humanitarian agency, the primary issue to confront planners for Iraq was the pressure not to engage overtly. In contrast to the war on Afghanistan, there was little support for a pre-emptive US-led military attack and appeals to the UN resulted in bitter international disputes. As well as wishing to maintain the faith of the international community in weapon inspections and its Security Council, it was imperative for the UN to maintain dialogue with the Iraqi government and to avoid fuelling any speculation that it was resigned to war.

UN humanitarian programmes had to work within these confines. Additional constraints stemmed from the presence of on-going operations in Iraq and the surrounding region. The Kuwaiti government, for example, was worried that talk of preparations would act as a pull factor for potential refugees. Aid agencies within Kuwait were consequently reluctant to disclose details of their own plans for fear of upsetting the authorities. Whilst the fear of sparking refugee movements may stem from a misunderstanding of contingency planning, the UK-based Iraqi Refugee Aid Council reported rumours of supplies at the Kuwaiti border to be an indication of the direction in which people would move. The political question was therefore how to ensure that any planning, locally or elsewhere, would

not be misconstrued as a prediction of an emergency. As rumours spiralled, the UN was keen to stress that contingency planning was standard – not exceptional – practice and that no predictions could be drawn from either the content or the timing of its governmental briefings.

Every humanitarian organisation has a duty to plan. With a long lead-in time for pre-positioning supplies and physical preparations on the ground, the requirement to plan came also from practical considerations. This is a lesson learnt from bitter experience. In the 1991 Gulf War, the numbers of refugees fleeing the US-led air campaign were much smaller than predicted but no-one foresaw the mass exodus following the subsequent crushing of insurgencies within Iraq. During the Spring of 1991, more than 500 Iraqis a day died from exposure, hunger and illness in the remote border regions of Turkey and Iran – a consequence of weather conditions, difficulties in gaining access and the unpreparedness of agencies, authorities and donors. Mindful that the international community is unforgiving to those who are taken by surprise, the UN began contingency planning for Iraq as early as February 2002 and pre-positioning of supplies towards the end of the year.

Planning in uncertainty

The events which forced the current crisis – and the added complications of the Kurdish issue, the alleged presence of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, and the effect of sustained economic sanctions – led to



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an unprecedented state of uncertainty. Iraq's prolonged pariah status and the limited NGO presence within Iraq added to the speculation, which is part of any contingency planning, as agencies proposed varying scenarios and attempted to put appropriate response systems in place. The absence of insight from local NGOs and the political limitations of planning in country both hindered plans. The information available pointed to serious concerns surrounding the effect of conflict on an extremely vulnerable population already affected by a decade of war and 12 years of sanctions and largely dependent on food rations under the Oil for Food programme.

In contrast, the variations in displacement scenarios were informative only as an expression of all the imponderables involved. In mid-February, the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs cited a 'medium case' scenario, under which 2 million people could become internally displaced with a potential exodus of 600,000 to 1.45 million people. At the outset of war it was widely assumed that most of Iraq's 25 million people had at least six weeks of rations and

Prepositioned emergency food aid in WFP warehouse near Amman, Jordan, 2003

would sit tight, security permitting. Planning for displacement is complicated by more than the questions of 'how many?', 'where to?' and 'how fast?'. Even days after the military campaign was underway, it was still not known who the lead agency for internal displacement would be. Furthermore, accurate assessments of the scale of need in internally displaced situations cannot take place if conflict makes access hazardous. Once borders are crossed, displacement becomes more visible yet more political. UNHCR took the lower number of potential refugees as its working figure and preparations in neighbouring countries proceeded on that basis. UNHCR's main concern is always to keep borders open. The need for this in terms of security, shelter and assistance is well documented. When nearly 400,000 Kosovar Albanians fled during the first two weeks of the NATO bombing campaign in 1999, Macedonia was severely criticised for barring refugee entry and aid agency access. In one incident 70,000 people waiting at the border were reported missing, raising concerns of their use as human shields.

Upholding the fundamental principles of *non-refoulement* and access to territory is always an unrelenting diplomatic challenge. Amongst Iraq's neigh-

bours, Iran is the only full signatory to the 1951 Convention. However, Syria was the first and, for a while, only country to publicly announce that it would accept refugees. In February, Iran rejected the option of sheltering refugees, preferring transit camps or camps within Iraqi territory. It promised to open its borders but only on a very limited basis, restricting access to those in 'physical danger'. Jordan also relented in February but remained ambivalent. It committed itself to keeping its borders open. However at the same time it also announced it was turning back thousands of 'ordinary' Iraqis and only welcoming better-off Iraqis coming for business or investment.

The primary responsibility for refugees falls to the governments of host countries but Iraq's neighbours are still coping with the political and economical aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War. Iran received 1.3 million refugees, 200,000 of whom still remain in the country in addition to more than 2 million Afghans - each costing an estimated \$674 a year to accommodate, with only \$6 of that coming from international aid. Persuading Iraq's neighbours to offer

effective protection requires the promise of wider support by the international community. In the event of massive outflows and a prolonged conflict this could require resettlement programmes as well as funds. Turkey, though a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, is the only country in the world to maintain its so-called 'geographical limitation' to cover European asylum seekers only. This means Iraqis in Turkey can receive only temporary protection and must be resettled. Yet in Kuwait there are already over 3,000 Iraqi refugees from the previous conflict still seeking this very option. The situation faced by local humanitarian agencies was summed up by the head of the Kuwait Red Crescent Society: to leave refugees in camps is inhumane - to let refugees live amongst the local population is "dangerous".

One thing that planners could safely assume was that the main determinant of any humanitarian emergency would be the duration and intensity of war. Once again, however, the specifics of the Iraq crisis exacerbated potential perils. There are several scenarios in which aid agencies, both inter- and non-governmental, stated they could not operate and would be forced to withdraw international staff. Given the ethnic divisions within Iraq and the Kurdish issue in particular, internal disorder resulting from a military attack could destabilise the entire region. Aid agencies have also stated that they are not equipped to operate in the event of

Displaced Iraqi Kurds return home - in 1991 - after the first war with Iraq.



chemical and biological warfare.

Since the gassing of Kurdish civilians in Halabja in 1988, the Kurdish population and the international humanitarian community have made some preparations against future attacks but neither have had the resources to go beyond simple training, stockpiling, makeshift sealing of buildings and snatched vaccination programmes. Either development would introduce a further set of unknowns which might lead to a sce-

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ary space. From providing purely logistical support and security in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, the armed forces' role in humanitarian operations has since increased significantly. NATO's lead in refugee protection in Kosovo brought military and humanitarian action to a political crossroads. The path since has seen the controversial emergence of Disaster Assistance Response Teams 'embedded' in the US military already operational in Afghanistan and planned for Iraq.

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Planning in an increasingly politicised humanitarian space

Following the passing of Resolution 1441, calls for greater openness in UN and governmental planning intensified. The difference in opinion on how open the dialogue has been and should be reflects the divide between those for and those against war, with the UN caught in between. Supporters of secrecy point to military necessities. Their opponents are fearful of limitations to effective inter-agency response and a greater freedom being afforded the military in humanitarian assistance.

While the possibility of UN-sanctioned force still existed, NGOs remained unsure of their role and the acceptability and timing of engagement. As planning developed from contingency to post-conflict, the uncertainty of the role of humanitarians increased. In February it was reported that the US military planned to handle initial humanitarian relief efforts and then gradually hand over responsibilities to the UN and other aid organisations. The US NGO network, Interaction, expressed its concerns over the leadership role designated to the military. Pointing to their own principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence, UK NGOs indicated their unwillingness to operate where the authorities of an occupying power were not accepted by the population.

It is clear that the Iraq crisis reflects yet another shift in the trend towards a blurring of humanitarian and mili-

As humanitarian action becomes increasingly politicised, the humanitarian community is demanding greater UN leadership. The challenges of this changing world order are diverse and require discussion in their own right. The implications for contingency planning for Iraq may be reflected in levels of preparedness. At the outset of conflict USAID was apparently ready. The NGO community repeated that it lacked the resources or information to prepare for anything but the widely-held and optimistic scenario of a quick campaign. As the military campaign did not come under UN auspices, this modified the appeals of the NGO community. The Disasters Emergency Committee, representing 12 UK-based NGOs, announced that it would fundraise and operate only under the banner of the UN.

However, the UN itself remained under-funded. In February an appeal for \$123 million was made to fund the preparedness of nine agencies, including \$60 million for UNHCR to cover plans in the region for an initial month. A week after war had started and with few reported refugees, UNHCR had received only \$25 million. The US was the first country to publicly announce funding for UNHCR contingency plans. Donor countries outside the coalition were only ever likely to respond when conflict had begun and an emergency was upon them. Opponents to war were reluctant to fund at all. Germany and France opposed EU funding for a humanitarian situation they perceived as the responsibility of occupying powers.

For the humanitarian community, effective response demands availabili-

ty of standby resources and there are very real worries that agencies will have to divert funds from emergencies elsewhere in order to achieve a minimal level of preparedness. UN agencies may have to borrow from internal reserves, divert funds from other emergencies or simply wait for funding. NGOs face similar funding difficulties, also knowing that the money may not be available from any source until the emergency has already started.

Implications for an effective response

The threat of conflict in Iraq presented many unknowns for contingency planners. The only certainty was that conflict would deepen an already existing humanitarian emergency. The ability to prepare thoroughly was impeded by a lack of information, coordination and funds as well as the threat of chemical and biological warfare. All compounded the potential effectiveness of a humanitarian response. However, the greatest constraint was the web of political tensions surrounding Iraq.

Now, as everyone watches the crisis in Iraq unfold to find out who has guessed best, less is being learned from - and less support given to - emergencies elsewhere. Although any future emergency will present a different set of uncertainties and constraints, the nature of both the conflict in Iraq and the humanitarian response may well warn contingency planners of the changing role their agencies will be expected to play in future emergencies. Whether planners feel this role will allow them to respond effectively is another matter.

Clare Graham is Public Information Assistant at UNHCR, London.
Email: GRAHAM@unhcr.ch

The views expressed here are her own and the discussion is based solely on publicly available information.

1. House of Commons International Development Committee *Preparing for the Humanitarian Consequences of Possible Military Action Against Iraq*, Fourth Report for Session 2002-03 Vol 1, p.8; UNHCR *The Iraq Emergency - An Uncertain Crisis* www.unhcr.ch