

Hearing on Sectarian Violence in Iraq and the Refugee Crisis: Summary

Wednesday, September 19, 1:00 p.m. - 3:30 p.m.
Dirksen Senate Office Building, Room 138

SUMMARY

The United States is taking measures to step up processing of Iraqi refugees, a senior State Department official told a hearing of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, but Members of Congress and a prominent international refugee organization said the U.S. government should be doing much more to respond to the refugee crisis and to address the sectarian violence that is one of its main engines.

The hearing on Sept. 19 was the second of two the Commission has held on Iraq. The first focused on the particular plight of Iraq's smallest religious minorities, while the second examined the nature and role of sectarian violence in Iraq and the much-criticized U.S. response to the greatest refugee crisis the world has seen in decades.

"The confluence of sectarian violence, religious discrimination, and other serious human rights violations has driven millions of Iraqis from their homes to seek refuge in the Nineveh plains in Northern Iraq, and in predominantly Kurdish regions, as well as in countries outside of Iraq," Commission Chair Michael Cromartie said. "For the past few years, the Commission has drawn attention to the growing refugee crisis and continues to emphasize the plight of those fleeing religious violence in Iraq."

Assistant Secretary of State Ellen R. Sauerbrey told the hearing that the United States had provided nearly \$200 million this year to international organizations and non-governmental organizations to help Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Of about 10,000 Iraqis the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees has referred to the United States, Washington has so far admitted 990 refugees during Fiscal Year 2007, Sauerbrey said. She predicted that the admission of Iraqis in the next fiscal year "will be substantially higher," with resettlement figures nearing 1,000 per month. Sauerbrey also said that at the same time as the hearing, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was announcing the appointment of a high-level advisor on Iraqi refugees. (Secretary Rice said that Ambassador James Foley would serve as the Senior Coordinator for Iraqi Refugee Issues.)

Sen. Arlen Specter (R-PA) called the issue of sectarian violence in Iraq "one of overwhelming importance," and said that it required far more attention from the U.S. government. He suggested that the United States do "a great deal more" to open up to Iraqi refugees, and that President George W. Bush should become more involved in addressing what he described as a "great humanitarian tragedy." "When he speaks on the problems in Iraq, it would be helpful, I think, to note the refugee problem," Specter told the Commissioners. Specter noted the magnitude of the refugee problem, saying that Iraq's neighbors were shouldering a great burden while the United States "has not been as open or forthcoming as the United States should be."

Sen. Gordon Smith (R-OR) also called for more action. "One of the tasks the United States needs to embrace more fully is the responsibility for the suffering of ordinary Iraqis," Smith said. "While we cannot necessarily treat the disease, we can help treat the symptoms." He highlighted S.1651, a bill he is co-sponsoring with Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA), which would allow especially vulnerable Iraqi refugees, such as members of religious minority communities, to be admitted to the United States and to be processed inside Iraq. "America historically has an honorable record in alleviating the plight of refugees from its wars," Smith noted. "Whether our effort is by ourselves, with allies, with the international organizations, more clearly needs to be done."

Rep. Steve Israel (D-NY) said there was bipartisan support in Congress for addressing the plight of Iraqi refugees. "Our debate on the floor of the House has been a polarizing debate, but one of the areas where we can agree on, that we have agreed on, is addressing the refugee crisis in Iraq," Israel said. He voiced appreciation for the Commission's recommendation to expand access to the U.S. Refugee Program for all Iraqis and to extend the P-2 category-which allows certain groups of refugees direct access to the U.S. processing program without the need for referral by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)-to members of Iraq's religious minority communities, and said he and his colleagues were eager to work legislatively to implement the Commission's recommendations.

With some 2,000 refugees being displaced every day, the international community has not faced such a magnitude of displacement in the Middle East since 1948, said Judy Cheng-Hopkins, the UNHCR's Assistant High Commissioner for Operations. About 2.2 million people are displaced within Iraq, and another 2 million have taken refuge in neighboring countries or elsewhere outside Iraq; some 165,000 of these have registered requests with UNHCR for third-country resettlement. Cheng-Hopkins noted that Iraqi refugees now comprise about 10 percent of the populations of Jordan and Syria, and that one in four residents of the Syrian capital, Damascus, is an Iraqi who has fled his or her homeland. Joining Jordan and other countries in the region, beginning on October 15, Syria will implement entry visa requirements that will virtually shut off the escape routes for Iraqi refugees, she said. Inside Iraq, 11 of 18 governorates have already closed their borders to IDPs. In spite of the desperate needs, UNHCR has received funding pledges for only 33 percent

of its current \$129 million appeal supporting refugee education programs.

Dana Graber Ladek, the Iraq Displacement Specialist with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), discussed the IOM's assessment of the situation of more than 100,000 families that have been displaced within Iraq. As many as 88 percent of them have been forced to flee their homes because they were targeted due to their religious identity. In spite of the refugees' and IDPs' pressing need for basic food, shelter, and social services, IOM has so far received only 20 percent of the funds appealed for this year.

Dr. Kenneth Katzman, a specialist in Middle East affairs for the Congressional Research Service, drew the Commissioners' attention to increasing tension and conflict among Shi'as, with political factions and their associated militias openly competing for power in Baghdad and Southern Iraq. In Basra, Iraq's main oil-producing region, three Shi'a parties are now competing for control of the oil production and distribution infrastructure. Shi'a militias are enforcing growing Islamization in the South, including violent threats against non-conforming Muslims, and University professors deemed to be too secular. Speaking on intra-Muslim sectarian violence, Dr. Katzman acknowledged that the Iraqi Interior Ministry was thoroughly penetrated by members of the Badr Organization, and had been involved in targeted operations against Sunni civilians. Despite those past violations, however, the new Interior Minister has been working to reduce the influence of Shi'a militias within the Iraqi national police force, thanks largely to pressure from the U.S. government.

Dr. Judith Yaphe, a specialist in Middle Eastern political analysis at the National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS), said that the dysfunctionality of Iraq's government-stemming in part from a constitution intentionally written to ensure a weak central government-made it unable to achieve meaningful political reconciliation. "Until you have coherence in government and functioning systems, things won't improve," she said. Dr. Yaphe also acknowledged the penetration of Iraqi ministries by Shi'a militias, noting that this phenomenon was consistent with the Iraqi government's fractured structure and Prime Minister al-Malaki's weakness relative to the other Shi'a political factions within his coalition government. Yaphe concluded by describing the current cycle of sectarian violence as "a complicated set of civil wars and power struggles" implicating both ethnic and religious identity. "Iraqis are under constant siege from poverty, unemployment, a dysfunctional government, corrupt political leaders, and vicious militias determined to enforce their peculiar combination of sectarian purity and material aggrandizement," she observed.

After the first hearing, the Commission wrote a letter to Secretary Rice recommending heightened U.S. attention to the severe threat facing the smallest religious minorities in Iraq. The Commission's other recommendations on Iraq can be found in the 2007 Annual Report.