

Hearing on Sectarian Violence in Iraq and the Refugee Crisis: Testimony by Judy Cheng-Hopkins, UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner for Operations

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Introduction

I would like to thank the Commission for the opportunity to appear before you on behalf of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. UNHCR is charged by the international community to ensure refugee protection and to identify durable solutions to refugee situations.

Without doubt, the protection of Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) is one of the most critical challenges with which UNHCR is grappling today. An estimated 2.2 million persons are currently displaced inside Iraq while another 2 million have fled the country to become refugees in the surrounding region or elsewhere. Unfortunately, this flow does not seem to be dissipating; we estimate that some 2,000 refugees are forced from their homes each day by the violence that continues to plague their homeland.

Simply put, the international community has not faced this magnitude of displacement in the Middle East since 1948. In UNHCR's view, the international community should move in a robust way to provide support to the countries hosting Iraqi refugees and preserve the fragile protection space. In the absence of a concerted effort by regional governments, donor governments (including the United States), UNHCR and its implementing partners, the situation will likely erode even further, bringing new levels of displacement and deepening protection problems.

Number of Iraqis Affected and Impact

Numbers of Iraqi refugees and IDPs

The majority of Iraqi refugees who have sought protection outside of Iraq have fled to Syria and Jordan. Iraqis now represent almost 10 percent of the populations in Syria and Jordan, and in Damascus, one

out every four people is an Iraqi refugee.

Impact

This influx of Iraqi refugees has resulted in a surge in demand, and consequently, a significant increase in the price of basic commodities. Power supplies in certain parts of Damascus have been unable to cope with demand, schools are overcrowded, and medical and health care facilities are exhausted. Prostitution among women and girls has increased; health problems have been exacerbated by lack of access to adequate care; trauma, anxiety, and other mental health problems are widespread; and women-headed households are common.

Iraqis are not permitted to work legally in their host countries, resulting in diminished assets and making survival more difficult. A recently completed survey in Damascus revealed that the overwhelming majority depend on some form of charity, and that 34 percent of Iraqis predict that they will run out of funds in the next month.

The strain caused by hosting large numbers of new arrivals has unfortunately led to border restrictions. Syria, which has been notably generous to Iraqis seeking protection, announced last week that Iraqis must obtain a visa before crossing the border. Jordan has also severely restricted access to those attempting to enter. Once the visa requirement for Syria is implemented (currently set for October 15), it will effectively mean that there is no longer a safe place, and no escape route, for Iraqis fleeing their country.

Internally displaced Iraqis are facing perhaps even more complex protection problems. Of those displaced since February 2006, approximately 70 percent are women and children. Many IDPs are denied registration, and therefore lack access to basic services, including subsidized food assistance, fuel, and basic protection.

Authorities in 11 governorates have imposed restrictions on IDP entry and residence, even for people of the same ethnic group, due to concerns about security, political considerations, or because social services are saturated and support from the central government is thin.

Increased restrictions on IDP movement and growing social and economic vulnerability have led to the establishment of makeshift IDP

camps and spontaneous clusters of improvised shelters. It is estimated that about 20 percent of IDPs are now in such collective settlements, where conditions are in some cases slum-like. Major needs of camp residents include water and sanitation, adequate shelter, medical care, and security.

UNHCR Operations

Turning now to what UNHCR and its partners are doing to address the protection challenges Iraqis are confronting. At the start of 2007, UNHCR began a concerted effort to enhance its presence in the region in order to offer protection and assistance to Iraqi refugees. This effort has included implementation of a registration system in order to provide Iraqis in host countries with documentation, to identify those who are most vulnerable and to better address their needs.

Those identified as vulnerable may then be referred for resettlement to a third country such as the United States. To date, UNHCR has referred more than 14,000 individuals for resettlement, with more than 10,000 of these referred to the United States. UNHCR is responsible for the front end of the resettlement process, which is referrals to resettlement countries. Countries, like the US, then vet these cases under their own resettlement laws and procedures.

Operations Inside Iraq

The security situation inside of Iraq, particularly in the center and in the south, poses serious challenges to humanitarian work. UNHCR, like many other agencies, has been forced to adopt remote management and partnership arrangements to ensure the delivery of basic protection and assistance. We are attempting to support Iraqi authorities and local institutions at the provincial level and to establish humanitarian warehouses to support the delivery of emergency assistance. Assistance to Iraqi IDPs includes distribution of non-food items such as tents, blankets, mattresses, fuel, and cooking equipment.

Operations Outside Iraq

UNHCR has largely worked to support the existing infrastructures of

host countries with an emphasis on education and health. This work has resulted in an agreement by the Jordanian government to allow Iraqi children to enroll in public schools, regardless of the residence status of their parents. This is considered a major breakthrough given Jordan's previous policy. Our objective now is to enroll 100,000 children in Syrian schools and 50,000 in Jordanian schools by the end of this academic year, in addition to the 60,000 already enrolled.

UNHCR has also established community centers in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon that provide emergency assistance, domestic violence counseling, services to address sexual violence, referrals for health and education assistance, and vocational and computer training.

Funding Appeals

A \$123.7 million for assistance to refugees in Syria and Jordan and Iraqi IDPs, which includes a large health component.

A \$129 million joint appeal with UNICEF to address education needs in host countries

The international community has contributed about 80 percent of the funding for the overall appeal. The education appeal, on the other hand, is funded at only 30 percent, funding which has been provided almost exclusively by the US.

Much more needs to be done as we expect that protection and assistance needs will continue to escalate. We appreciate the US government's generous contributions and look forward to working with our US counterparts in a concerted effort to ensure the safety and well-being of Iraqis affected by this crisis.