

“Iraqi Refugees”
Hearing before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
U.S. Helsinki Commission
July 22, 2010

Testimony by Ambassador L. Craig Johnstone
President, Refugees International, ad interim

Introduction

I would like to thank Chairman Cardin and Co-Chairman Hastings for holding this hearing and for giving Refugees International the opportunity to share its assessment of the increasingly protracted Iraqi displacement crisis.

The United States has a special responsibility to ensure basic protection and adequate assistance for the approximately 500,000 Iraqi refugees living in the region and the more than 1.5 million Iraqis displaced inside of their country.

This hearing is very timely, because Iraq is entering a period of transition. By the end of August the United States will have withdrawn half of its forces, leaving only 50,000—all of whom are slated to leave by the end of 2011. The drawdown will have a direct impact on the United States and the United Nations’ (UN) ability to access vulnerable communities and to provide them with the protection and support they desperately need.

Our recommendations to the Members of the Helsinki Commission are: (1) Work with other Members of Congress to ensure that the United States funds the UN humanitarian appeals at no less than 50 percent; (2) Continue resettling refugees from Iraq at current or increased levels for the foreseeable future, while also working with other Members of Congress to improve the antiquated and inadequate domestic resettlement program; (3) Help raise awareness of the refugee population from other countries inside of Iraq that is in need of greater protection and assistance; and (4) Encourage the administration and the UN to increase their humanitarian access to Iraq’s most vulnerable.

Your leadership on this critical issue will help to ensure that as the U.S. military withdraws, Iraqis uprooted by the war will not be forgotten.

Refugees Face Deteriorating Conditions in Exile

Today the majority of Iraq’s refugees live in Syria and Jordan. Unlike most refugees worldwide, many Iraqi refugees live in cities, enjoy freedom of movement, have access to and are usually able to enroll their children in primary and secondary school, and benefit from basic health care and clinics targeted to assist the refugee population. The host communities have been relatively hospitable as well. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the Governments of Jordan and Syria deserve high praise for having achieved so much on behalf of Iraqi refugees.

However, serious issues remain. The main problem for many Iraqis is that they are not able to secure work permits or engage in official employment. Without a source of income, daily life

has become increasingly more difficult for Iraqi families expected to pay rent, feed their children, and absorb the basic costs associated with schooling.

As a result some refugee families are forced to return to Iraq in search of jobs and housing only to end up living as squatters in slum areas; many women turn to night clubs and prostitution; some children drop out of school to work; and others turn to smugglers to help them find work opportunities abroad.

This situation is likely to get worse if the United States and other donor governments fail to generously fund the UN Refugee Agency and other organizations working to serve only the most vulnerable among these refugees. If current funding shortfalls persist, 30,000 refugee students in Syria will be unable to enroll for the 2010-2011 school terms due to a lack of uniforms and education kits.

It should be noted that every month thousands of Iraqis continue to seek asylum in neighboring countries. Since 2008 fewer than 75,000 refugees have returned, citing insecurity, lack of access to property and employment opportunities, and insufficient provision of basic services in places of origin as factors discouraging return.

Squatter Settlements inside Iraq

Despite the country's vast oil reserves, the Government is not yet able to effectively exploit this resource to generate wealth for its people. The country is currently facing a financing gap of billions of dollars, that many argue will persist at least until the end of 2011, as well as a depressed oil price. Only 30% of the current budget is allocated for development. There is thus little money available to begin to rebuild the country after years of neglect, conflict, sanctions, and war.

Schools are run down and dilapidated. Due to the shortage in buildings and classrooms, most schools often operate two to three shifts of students daily, leaving some children with fewer than three hours of daily contact with their teachers. Many schools are also segregated ethnically and by sect. Iraqi statistics count 31,598 violent attacks against educational institutions in the first five years of U.S. occupation. One in six schools has been vandalized, damaged, or destroyed. The poor quality of education is a significant factor in the high rates of student dropout.

Hospitals and clinics lack basic medicines and well trained doctors and nurses. Many Iraqis still do not have access to a regular supply of electricity. In the summer heat where temperatures soar to 120 degrees Fahrenheit, millions are forced to live with less than six hours of electricity per day. In some parts of Baghdad power has been reduced to only one hour a day. Entire neighborhoods lack proper roadways, drainage, and sanitation. These are some of the many reasons that U.S. humanitarian assistance remains essential.

The inability of the Government of Iraq to provide basic essential services to its people is most evident in the sprawling squatter settlements that permeate most neighborhoods and towns throughout the country. The UN Refugee Agency estimates that there are over 500,000 internally displaced Iraqis living without land rights or access to basic services in slums across the country.

Refugees International visited scores of these sites last February. Dispossessed of their homes and belongings, these vulnerable people live amongst trash dumps, polluted waters, and under plastic sheeting. Many do not enjoy food security and are unable to send their children to school. Their status as displaced often makes access to employment challenging if not impossible.

These squatter settlements mushroomed during the war and continue to be filled by those who have no other means to survive. Many residents were once home owners, and their children attended school. UNHCR and other agencies are beginning to try to provide basic assistance to these people, but their efforts are hampered by the continued lack of access to most parts of the country, especially including the many neighborhoods of Baghdad.

Refugees inside of Iraq

In addition to the millions of Iraqis displaced inside of the country, there are over 40,000 refugees registered with UNHCR living inside of the country. The majority are Palestinians, followed by Iranian Kurds, Turks, Iranian Arabs (Ahwazis), and some Syrian Arabs. Refugees were not spared from the violence that ravaged the country in recent years. Some of the groups were particularly targeted. The Palestinians in Baghdad and the Ahwazis in the south suffered targeted killings, arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture, and other human rights abuses. The UN Refugee Agency continues to view these groups as especially vulnerable.

In the case of the Palestinians, when they attempted to flee persecution and violence in Iraq, they were stopped at the Jordanian and Syrian borders and were forbidden to enter. Unlike almost every other person fleeing Iraq, Palestinians faced extreme discrimination and were denied asylum. Over 3,000 of them were forced to live in remote desert camps on the border for over three years. One of the most notorious of these camps, Al-Tanf, was sandwiched between the Iraqi and Syrian checkpoints in a ditch alongside the road servicing mostly large tanker trucks. Several children were killed by these trucks. Others died from medical complications after being denied access to clinics and hospitals.

Thanks to the generosity of the United States and many other countries, most of these inhospitable camps are being closed. Still, the ongoing security, protection, and assistance needs of Palestinian refugees from Iraq must not be forgotten. Inside Baghdad, Palestinians continue to face insecurity, arbitrary arrest, and general hostility from large segments of the population. There is evidence of a widening gap of intolerance and resentment between Iraqis and Palestinians that has only been exacerbated since the war. Entrenched discrimination makes life for Palestinians extraordinarily challenging. They are often ruthlessly targeted at checkpoints and detained simply for being Palestinian. Due to the recent violence, over half of the Palestinian refugee community has fled or was killed. Other Palestinian refugees who wish to flee, have nowhere to run. Not a single country in the region will afford them temporary asylum.

Given these particularly dire circumstances, it is critical that the United States support the efforts of UNHCR to provide protection and assistance to this group and to ensure that all possible solutions to their plight are deployed, including third country resettlement.

Refugee Resettlement to the United States

After a slow and shaky start, the U.S. government's resettlement program for Iraqis has grown. Today some 48,000 Iraqis have been offered an opportunity to rebuild their lives in the United States. Resettlement has benefited women at risk, religious minorities, those facing forced return or indefinite detention, Iraqis associated with the U.S. military, and refugees who suffered extreme violence, among others. The United States should be proud of its efforts to begin to help protect the most vulnerable of Iraq's refugees; however, the government should not rest nor become complacent or hardened during this critical time of transition in Iraq.

Resettlement will continue to remain a crucial component of the U.S. humanitarian response in the years to come. It is a program that should be expanded, not cut, as the need continues to grow. The overwhelming majority of Iraqi refugees registered with UNHCR have no plans to return. As noted, their situation in asylum is becoming more and more precarious. Resettlement to the United States will thus remain an essential tool to help provide Iraqis with lasting solutions.

At the same time, we note the difficult circumstances into which Iraqis especially have been resettled. Inadequate funding, little social support, and lack of jobs due to the poor economy have made life for Iraqis extraordinarily challenging. We urge you to work with the Administration and other Members of Congress to engage in systemic reform of this program. In so doing it will help ensure that Iraqis, and other refugees brought to the United States, will have a basic foundation from which to rebuild their lives. Resettlement should be a real durable solution for refugees, not an experience that brings more hardship.

Funding UN Humanitarian Appeals

All of the above populations benefit from the programs and services that are provided by the UN Refugee Agency and other UN organizations, among others.

For the last two years, the United States has been an essential donor to the UN humanitarian appeals to respond to the Iraq displacement crisis. This limited funding has helped provide cash assistance to a minority of the most vulnerable, ensured that students have school uniforms, provided psychosocial counseling for those who remain traumatized from experiencing and witnessing extreme violence, and helped a small minority resettle to the United States.

During this period of transition in Iraq, it is critical that Congress continues to show its support for assisting and protecting refugees and the displaced by funding current and future humanitarian appeals at no less than 50 percent. So far this year the United States has only funded just over 23% of the total appeal. At this critical juncture, the United States should be scaling up its humanitarian and development funding, not reducing it—and yet the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) in particular is planning to dramatically scale back its assistance next year. This will adversely affect the thousands of displaced Iraqis and returnees who rely on the OFDA supported Return and Assistance Centers to access government benefits and legal aid. These services help ensure that returns are safe and sustainable.

Without the necessary resources in place, more displaced children will drop out of school, fewer refugees will have access to life saving medical treatment in exile, and even more will be forced to return to Iraq against their will, because they cannot afford to pay rent.

We also encourage the Helsinki Commission to work with other governments, especially in Europe, to fund these appeals.

Humanitarian Access to Vulnerable Communities

On the one hand the U.S. government, the UN, and the entire international community often champion the considerable security progress inside Iraq. On the other hand, these same entities continue to be extremely constrained by highly restrictive security protocols. These protocols no longer reflect the realities in the country, and the lack of access continues to severely hamper the humanitarian response of the UN and the United States in reaching the internally displaced and assessing the conditions of squatter settlements.

The UN Department for Safety and Security and the Resident Security Officers for the United States must adapt their security protocols to the new and changing realities and allow greater access for humanitarian workers. The northern and southern governorates of Iraq are widely recognized as being safe. Many parts of the central governorates can also be accessed daily for field visits.

Refugees International staff was able to travel alone, without security escorts, throughout most of Baghdad and multiple locations within Diyala, Salah al-Din and Babel. Iraqis of all types and backgrounds who were interviewed by Refugees International expressed a strong desire to see the UN and other international actors return and fully function in the country.

Currently, the U.S. government and the UN are completely dependent upon the U.S. military to provide transportation, logistical support, and security outside of the international or “green” zone. Access to Iraqi communities occurs irregularly and in a very limited fashion. Plans have to be made months in advance to coordinate trips. This already limited access will be further reduced with the impending U.S. military withdrawal. In addition, the United States and the UN will also lose a valuable source of information about the humanitarian conditions on the ground. It is critical that Congress continues to work with the Administration and the UN in finding safe alternatives that will ensure greater humanitarian access while maintaining staff security.

Conclusion

During this period of critical transition in Iraq, the United States must reaffirm its multi-year humanitarian commitment to the people of Iraq. As the U.S. military withdraws, the United States must seek to increase its support of and access to Iraq’s displaced. Rebuilding shattered lives and neglected, disenfranchised communities is central to the future peace and stability of Iraq. Refugees and the internally displaced must be a central part of this equation.

I would like to close by again thanking Chairman Cardin and Co-Chairman Hastings not only for holding this important hearing but also for all of the work you have both done and continue to do on behalf of Iraq’s refugees. Your efforts have undoubtedly helped touch the lives of thousands

of families and individuals in need. Refugees International looks forward to continuing to work with you on this issue and remains grateful for your leadership.