



ESCAPING MAYHEM AND MURDER

Iraqi Refugees In The Middle East

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) organized a Delegation that traveled to Istanbul, Beirut, Amman and Damascus July 2 – 13, 2007, on a fact-finding mission concerning the more than two million Iraqis who have now fled their homeland and taken temporary refuge in surrounding countries. Its purpose was to see their situation first-hand, assess needs and service gaps, and make recommendations. Our mission was led by Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, Archbishop Emeritus of Washington, and Bishop Nicholas A. DiMarzio, Bishop of Brooklyn, and included representation from Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) (see below for names).

More than two million Iraqis are now estimated to have sought safety in neighboring countries. When added to the two million Iraqis who have left their homes for other parts of Iraq and become displaced in their own country, the uprooted now comprise about 15 percent of Iraq's total population – a terrible if unintended consequence of the conflict that began in 2003. The exodus continues. At the time of our visit, an estimated 50,000 people a month continued to stream across Iraq's borders, mostly to Syria. As of late August, the estimate was 60,000.

The patience and resources of the receiving countries are running out, and their doors are closing. Lebanon, Jordan and Syria already host, cumulatively, some 1.5 million Palestinians. When the current numbers of Iraqis are added to the Palestinians in Syria and Jordan, the two nations that have been most generous, these represent up to 10% of Syria's population and 24% of Jordan's.

Why Are They Leaving?

The incessant, generalized violence in many parts of Iraq prompted the American Ambassador there, Ryan Crocker, to report by video-link to the Congress in late July that the mood in the country was one of fear. Added to this, many individual Iraqis are being targeted and threatened with death by violent extremists, whether because they are Shia, Sunni, Christian, Palestinian, professionals, businesspeople, U.S. government employees, or the employees of U.S. government contractors. In talks with our Delegation, refugees described

the death threats, kidnappings, and murders that had affected them directly. Their stories were harrowing and heart-breaking.

In these circumstances, Iraqis are searching for havens. Within Iraq, some Sunnis are taking refuge in Sunni areas; Shias, in Shia areas. Or they are fleeing to nearby countries. Iraq's tiny Palestinian group (5,000 left from the Saddam-era total of 30,000), with no larger community inside Iraq to help shelter them, have tried to enter both Jordan and Syria, but found themselves enmeshed in the larger problem of Palestinians already in those countries. Over 1,600 are stuck in especially harsh conditions in two camps at the border with Syria (the Al Tanaf and Al Walid camps). Fortunately, UNHCR has succeeded in finding resettlement for most of a third, smaller group, in Jordan. Our Delegation tried to visit Al Tanaf, but failed to get permission from the government of Syria to do so.

Especially critical is the plight of Iraq's minority religious communities, including Christians and Mandeans (or Sabeans). These groups, whose home has been what is now Iraq for many centuries, are literally being obliterated – not because they are fleeing generalized violence but because they are being specifically and viciously victimized by Islamic extremists and, in some cases, common criminals. They, too, lack an umbrella community within Iraq to which to repair. Some are escaping from Baghdad, principally the Dora neighborhood, to the Kurdish north or the Nineveh plain. Of Dora's 2,000 Catholic families, we were told, only 300 were left. Many of the Chaldeans had departed for Turkey and Lebanon, and most of those we met desired eventual resettlement elsewhere. Christians still in Iraq now number an estimated 500-600,000, compared to the 1.5 million who were there before. Mandeans, who reportedly numbered 60,000 in Iraq in the early 1990s, say only 5,000 remain in Iraq, including only five priests. The disappearance of these ancient communities from Iraq and the region is a tragedy for them and a bitter blow to future prospects for diverse, tolerant societies in the Middle East.

The Three Solutions

What will happen to the Iraqi refugees, most of whom are now in a desperate state? For refugees anywhere, there are only three possible solutions. The preferred outcome is that they return home, but for Iraqis that is not possible now and, for many, may never be. The second solution for refugees is that they be allowed to settle permanently in the country where they have taken asylum, but that is not acceptable under current circumstances in any of the host countries.

Finally, a refugee may be resettled in a third country. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is working at full tilt to present refugees in the most extreme need to resettlement countries for interviews, and the resettlement process has finally started. The United States is gearing up to do its part, but progress is slow and the numbers discussed so far are very small relative to the need. Although the refugees accommodated abroad can never amount to more than a fraction of those who have fled, the capacity of the United States, Canada, Australia, and other resettlement countries is far from being utilized.

This leaves the world community with the task of assisting the countries we visited, plus Egypt, another host nation, to care for the Iraqis now on their soil. So far that assistance has been badly inadequate.

Stranded Across the Region – Temporary Asylum

Although each of the major host countries for Iraqi refugees has its own circumstances and challenges, discussed in separate sections below, the refugees' hardships are similar from one place to another.

The first problem the Iraqis encounter is that, apart from the few who arrived abroad with ample funds and able to qualify for residency permission, their status generally has not allowed them to work, send their children to school, or gain access to public health care in their host countries. Even if they register with UNHCR, the protection and assistance that registration brings were found to be inadequate. Since none of the host countries is a full signatory to the U.N.

Refugee Convention of 1951, none feels constrained to accord the refugees their full Convention rights. Most agonizing to many refugees is that, since they may not be in compliance with all the host country's (often onerous) conditions for staying, the fear of arrest and deportation keep many perpetually indoors. This places severe strain on families already dealing with danger, privation, and trauma.

Meeting high rents was another problem to which the refugees we encountered returned again and again. Paying for accommodation strains Iraqis' resources and causes many to live with the fear of eviction. Most reside in dingy, overcrowded spaces, with a family of five often sharing a room or two, or three families sharing a flat.

Education, too, is a great source of worry for most refugees; they cannot send their children to school normally, either because they lack the money for tuition, or their children do not speak the local language (in Turkey), or government policy forbids it. If comprehensive solutions are not introduced, an entire generation of Iraqi children could go uneducated. Health care is another worry, since the refugees generally can neither access the (already strained) local health systems nor pay the high costs of private care. With many traumatized by what they endured in Iraq, and with cancer and other maladies at uncommonly high levels, medical attention is an acute need for the refugee population.

The refugees find themselves in these difficulties for reasons that are not hard to fathom. The host countries lack the resources to offer them better services. Even more importantly, they fear that the refugees, like the Palestinians, may stay indefinitely -- complicating ethnic and religious tensions, running up prices, increasing the competition for jobs, exhausting water and other scarce resources, and saddling the state with social obligations stretching out beyond the horizon. Thus, governments find themselves trying to square a circle -- satisfying their humanitarian responsibilities to some degree by receiving and accommodating large numbers of Iraqis while making it evident that the refugees are not welcome to stay permanently. Not surprisingly, restrictions on refugees' entry have tightened. Syria, the last country to admit Iraqis with few restrictions, in early September imposed the requirement that refugees arrive with a visa obtained in Baghdad.

UNHCR Swings into Action

Although resettlement in a third, often faraway country is not always the preferred solution for refugees, it is the only solution for many Iraqi families today, especially those in a vulnerable state or who have relatives abroad. In December of last year, UNHCR declared that those fleeing southern and central Iraq should be exempted from the normal need to prove their refugee status, but be regarded as *prima facie* refugees in view of what is known of the terrible conditions from which they are escaping. Now, UNHCR is working feverishly in the countries we visited to register the refugees and to refer to the United States and other countries those cases most in need of resettlement as measured against criteria agreed upon with the resettlement countries (see box). UNHCR's Damascus office has become the organization's largest registration operation in the world, having by mid-July registered over 100,000 Iraqis.

Resettlement Begins

Nonetheless, the numbers in the resettlement stream are so far disappointingly small compared to the need. UNHCR met a U.S. request for 7,000 referrals across the region before a July deadline, and traveling teams of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officers have begun to interview them for resettlement acceptance here, though the pace is extremely slow. New security demands are causing DHS interviewers to see only four cases per day instead of the normal six. UNHCR continues to refer refugees, and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Ellen Sauerbrey said April 17 in Geneva that our country could accept many more this year if UNHCR made the referrals. In August, the State Department estimated that it was on track to interview as many as 6,000 refugees by the end of September. As of the end of July, 190 refugees had arrived in the U.S., while, as of the end of August, 2,170 refugees in the region had been approved for U.S. resettlement but had not yet departed.

The time-consuming procedures employed to bring Iraqi refugees to the U.S. (the process of getting security clearances for those accepted takes an average of 65 days all by itself), means that, in our estimation, the number who actually arrive in the U.S. by the end of this calendar year will be about 2,500.

A sub-group among the refugees that has drawn public attention are those who have worked for the U.S. government in Iraq and whose lives are threatened on that account. To its credit, the U.S. has set up a “direct access” possibility for such former employees, who can by-pass UNHCR and apply for U.S. resettlement directly with the Overseas Processing Entity (OPE) in Jordan that readies U.S. cases for consideration by a DHS adjudicating officer. As of the end of August, that OPE had received about 500 referrals, a good start. So far, the U.S. does not have permission from the governments of Turkey, Lebanon or Syria to accept such cases in those countries. Unfortunately, Iraqi employees of U.S. government contractors in Iraq are not eligible at this time for this expedited treatment.

Another avenue for U.S. entry is a special immigrant visa (SIV) for “translators for the U.S. armed forces.” The State Department said in August that “over 69” such visas had been issued. In a third initiative, the U.S. has agreed on a procedure with UNHCR whereby it refers to UNHCR cases of interest for expedited (Track A) or normal (Track B) processing.

Welcome as these initiatives are, they do not reach the U.S.-associated Iraqis who are still in Iraq but may be in mortal danger. Some way should be found to allow them to apply for U.S. resettlement in place.

Unaccompanied Refugee Minors

All refugee flows contain a number of children without their families. We heard at each destination reports that such cases among the Iraqis were few, since children without parents were often taken care of by relatives. UNHCR Syria told us it had seen few cases of refugee minors alone, but was aware there could be many more. When such children are discovered, a UNHCR protection officer does a “best interest determination” to evaluate what solution UNHCR should seek on the child’s behalf. We are concerned that such determinations may not be sufficiently pursued with children in other problematic situations, such as those in the care of persons who might be unwilling or unable to see to their best interests. We are also concerned that 17 year-olds may not be considered as minors, as they should be.

Child Labor

We encountered reports of child labor from UNHCR and saw the phenomenon up close when we spoke with the refugees themselves. Some factories reportedly hire children but not their fathers, and the children work 10 hours a day or more. For their part, parents badly need their children's earnings, and are themselves reluctant to spend too much time outside for fear of arrest and detention. One family in Jordan told us it had tried to send its 11-year old son to labor in a workshop. "Is it right that this boy should work 12 hours a day?" his father asked us. In fact, he continued, the son was beaten up on the job and had to return home.

The Special Responsibility of the United States

It should be clear to all that the United States is not only the country that by wealth and influence is best placed to assist the Iraqi refugees, but also that we as Americans must assume a large measure of responsibility for the events that have caused the refugee outflow. What was not evident to us before our trip was the extent to which many refugees have been specifically victimized for their association with Americans. We understood that U.S. government interpreters were being targeted, but did not appreciate that the extremists in Iraq were also wreaking retribution on Iraqis with even tenuous relationships with U.S. policies, such as cooks and drivers for U.S. contractors. We were also told that at least one host government suspects the U.S. is interested in assisting only those with close associations with our country, leaving the host countries to absorb the rest. It is this misconception that appears to be making some host governments reluctant to allow "direct access" to U.S. resettlement to be implemented on their soil. In this way, those who assisted the American effort continue, even as refugees, to be stigmatized by their involvement, however distant, with the American cause.

The U.S. government has devoted \$183 million in FY-2007 to Iraqi refugees in the region and to internally displaced people inside Iraq, according to the State Department. About \$110 million of this went to international organizations in the region, including \$37 million for UNHCR in response to its \$123 million

appeal for the region and \$30 million to a UNHCR / UNICEF appeal for education for refugee children. Another \$10 million was set aside for Jordan and Syria for refugee education. The remainder went to USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance for people displaced inside Iraq. Any additional funds will probably be part of the Administration's budget for FY-2008, which starts on October 1, 2007.

TURKEY

Turkey is a 99 percent Sunni Moslem nation that is highly secular in its political culture. It hosts the fewest Iraqi refugees, around 10,000, mostly Chaldean Christians. About 4,000 are registered with UNHCR. Of those, UNHCR has recently referred about half to the United States, and ICMC is preparing these resettlement applicants' cases for interviews with DHS officers. In July and August, 348 Iraqi refugees departed for the U.S.

The "Satellite Cities"

The Iraqi refugees in Turkey do not constitute a visible burden on the society. Not only are they a statistically insignificant fraction of the population, but the government of Turkey requires them to be dispersed among 25 "satellite cities," where they can be monitored and where their visibility is low. In this way, the government reinforces its message that the refugees will not be allowed to integrate into Turkish society, but must move on at some point. (An exception is made for the Iraqi-Turkmen refugees, who may stay in Turkey if they wish and who, as a result, are not put forward by UNHCR for resettlement elsewhere.) As of mid-July, the inflow of new refugees from Iraq was about 300 per month, according to UNHCR, mostly Turkmen.

To avoid the hardship of being sent to the poorer, outlying satellite cities without the language or adequate support, many refugees did not register with the government or UNHCR, remaining illegally in Istanbul. The start-up of UNHCR resettlement referrals, however, is causing more and more refugees to declare themselves, since UNHCR registration is required for referral to a resettlement country.

Resettlement

The International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) operates the U.S. government's Overseas Processing Entity (OPE) in Turkey, preparing refugee cases for interview by DHS officers. This process in Istanbul is especially onerous because the refugees must be brought in by bus from the satellite cities - - most several hours from Istanbul, and some as many as 27 hours - for their various interviews, medical screening, and orientation briefings on life in the U.S. The first two rounds of DHS interviews have yielded an acceptance rate of about 85 percent.

Some 90 percent of Iraqis in Turkey are Chaldean Christians. An estimated 60 to 70 percent of the Chaldean refugees have relatives or contacts in our country. Chaldeans here number about 250,000, and are found mostly in the Midwest (Detroit and Chicago) and the West (California and Nevada).

Deportations

We were told that some Iraqis were being deported on arrival at the airport in Istanbul, sometimes depending on whether they have credit cards. Without a determination of whether they are refugees, this practice would violate the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and international customary law. Nor does Turkey accept Iraqi refugees coming through Syria; at the Turkish authorities' insistence, UNHCR advises such refugees to return to Syria. On July 26, UNHCR complained publicly that Turkey had forced the return to Iraq of 135 Iraqis, some of whom appeared to have made an asylum claim. Turkey also agreed, however, to conduct a joint screening exercise with UNHCR to identify others who had arrived with the group of 135 and who wished to apply for asylum.

A Hard Life

Meanwhile, most Iraqi refugees in Turkey must continue to try to meet the challenges of day-to-day living under harsh circumstances. Although refugees who have registered and gone to a satellite city are eligible for government

services, most refugee families cannot take full advantage of many of these services due to the language. It is not possible, for example, for most children to go to school because they do not speak Turkish. Nor can refugees in the satellite cities work; even informal labor is hard to come by. Istanbul-based NGOs, meanwhile, are discouraged from assisting refugees in the satellite cities, where they can visit but not set up an organization. Furthermore, the Chaldean Church in Turkey is based in Istanbul and largely absent from the satellite cities. This leaves refugees there without the support structure that would exist for them in Istanbul.

Human Trafficking

We were told human trafficking in Turkey had declined significantly in the last ten years after the authorities made a determined effort to stop its most egregious forms. The State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report (2007) says that the government of Turkey has made progress in both enforcement of its laws against traffickers and in offering treatment to trafficking victims, though many improvements are still needed.

LEBANON

The many police checkpoints across Beirut, the Hezbollah partisans camped in the downtown area faced by Lebanese Army troops and their armored vehicles, and the daily reports of the Lebanese army's (recently-concluded) siege of the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian camp in the north were all reminders that the Iraqi refugees in Lebanon find themselves in a deeply troubled country. What the refugees find even worse, however, is that most of them are there illegally according to Lebanese law, and that they are therefore always subject to the risk of detention and deportation. This makes it difficult for refugees to move about, work, or procure the necessities of life. Estimates of the number of Iraqis in Lebanon vary from 25,000 to 50,000; the Danish Refugee Council is conducting a survey to assess the "population size, geographic distribution, and living conditions" of the refugees. A previous DRC survey, in mid-2005, put the refugees' number then at 20,000.

“Protection is Shrinking”

Lebanese authorities, of course, do have a security problem, and can legitimately view the influx of refugees via Syria – 70% of whom are men -- as a security concern. But the refugees have internationally-accepted rights as well – most importantly, the right not to be sent back to an extremely dangerous Iraq (the right of *non-refoulement*). UNHCR recognized this danger when it declared last December that Iraqis from central and southern Iraq, including those in Lebanon, should henceforth be considered *prima facie* refugees.

We learned that in Lebanon, however, refugees can be put in detention even if they can show UNHCR registration; that even mothers are sometimes imprisoned while their children are left without caretakers, and that detainees can remain incarcerated indefinitely unless they agree to return to Iraq – a return that assuredly is not voluntary in any meaningful sense. (Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, though it allows UNHCR to conduct refugee status determinations, attempt to provide refugees protection, and offer refugees limited assistance – while maintaining at the same time that the refugees are in Lebanon illegally.)

We visited the detention center in central Beirut, which is a converted underground parking garage, and found it unhealthy and overcrowded. Although the *Securite General* staff who manage the facility were trying to treat the detainees humanely; and although, to their credit, they allowed a Caritas Lebanon office on the premises to counsel the inmates and provide them legal and medical assistance, the system itself violates refugees’ rights. Absent some credible accusation of criminal behavior, refugees should not be imprisoned. At the time of our visit, according to UNHCR, there were 400 people in detention, 310 of whom were Iraqis. “Protection for refugees,” UNHCR told us, “is shrinking.”

Legalization and Local Integration in Lebanon

At the Lebanese *Securite General* offices in Beirut, we learned that there is provision in Lebanon for legalized residency for one year for entrants who find employment and pay a fee of \$1,000. We were told that about 3,000 people availed themselves of this possibility last year. Unfortunately, most refugees cannot meet these conditions. Nor are the Lebanese authorities, who seem fixated above all on the security aspects of the refugee influx, willing at this point to consider local integration.

Registration

UNHCR Lebanon had at the time of our visit registered this year 2,600 refugees, for a total of 6,500, with up to 4,000 more awaiting registration. (This is still a small proportion of the total refugee number. This, UNHCR told us, was because it was risky for refugees to move around Beirut, many did not live in Beirut at all, and, with the government giving scant recognition to UNHCR registration papers, many refugees thought registration not worth the risk.)

Resettlement

UNHCR is also working hard on resettlement, having referred 645 people to ICMC (which operates the U.S. government's Overseas Processing Center for Lebanon), and 200 to Sweden.

At the time of our visit, U.S. officials in Beirut were awaiting the imminent arrival of DHS officers to interview the refugee applicants referred by UNHCR and prepared by the OPE. The interviews occur in the U.S. embassy, located far from the center of town and employing security procedures for visitors that make the refugees' entrance and exit cumbersome and time-consuming. We hope that ways will be found nonetheless to ensure a flow-through of refugee applicants sufficiently fast to ensure that DHS is able to process the maximum number during its limited stays in Lebanon.

THREE REFUGEE FAMILIES

We visited three Iraqi families living together in the same apartment in a poor section of Damascus - all headed by women without their husbands. All were Mandeans, from Baghdad. They had come to Syria separately, all under threat because of their religion. Each woman had a room in the bare, third-story walk-up for herself and her children; They went outside only infrequently because they had no legal status in Syria and feared being picked up by the police.

The first woman's husband had gone to Sweden and gained asylum status there, so she was waiting for him to send for her and their three children. Her father-in-law, a Sabeian religious leader, had been kidnapped in Iraq, and the family had had to pay a large ransom to free him. Now, he, too, had made it to Sweden. She did not know how many Sabeans were left in Iraq, but said Sabeans there were generally under death threat, and were having to give up their possessions and flee. She survived in Damascus thanks to money sent her by her husband's family in Sweden.

The second woman's husband was also in Sweden. In Iraq, one of his friends had been killed in front of him, and he had left Baghdad with his wife and three children under threat of being killed himself if he did not convert to Islam. He had owned a silver shop. After staying three months in Damascus, he had gotten help from other Sabeans to go to Sweden, where he was trying to gain legal status before sending for his family.

The third woman had arrived in Damascus eight months ago with her husband and two children after a threatening letter was slipped under their door in Baghdad. After two months, her husband had left to find work, and she had not heard from him since - an obvious source of anguish. She had no relatives to help her, and no money, and was living off the generosity of the other women. Her daughter and son were just old enough to go to school, but the fees were too high to send them.

JORDAN

Amman was the calmest and most orderly capital we visited, and Jordan was said to be a pole of attraction in the region in areas like foreign investment, financial interchange, and health care. To their credit, the Jordanians have accepted as many as 750,000 Iraqis. Even for a well-run nation, however, that is a very large burden. When one considers that Jordan is a country of only 5.6 million and that it also hosts 600,000 Palestinians, it should not be surprising that its government is feeling the pinch. Unfortunately for those fleeing Iraq, this had resulted in recent weeks in Jordan's making entry for refugees much more difficult.

Jordan's most deep-seated concern about the Iraqi refugees, we were told, is the possibility that they, like the Palestinians, might stay indefinitely. The U.S. embassy spoke of the Jordanian fear of creating "parallel structures" for the refugees – institutions, like refugee-centered schools, meant to deal with a temporary problem but that could assume permanency. Like Lebanon, Jordan also sees the large influx of Iraqis in security terms: Iraqis were involved in the 2005 terrorist bombings of three major Amman hotels that killed 60 people.

Jordan must also cope with the direct costs of hosting the refugees as well as the inflationary, employment and other effects on the Jordanian economy. Jordan said at regional talks in Amman July 25 that it was expending about \$1 billion annually for the refugees. The negative effects on the economy, on the other hand, are a subject of debate. A July report by the University of Jordan's Center of Strategic Studies saw different causes for Jordan's economic woes, including "the end of subsidized fuel from Iraq, high international oil prices, exports of the domestic food supply and rising costs of food" – counting the refugees' presence as a less influential factor. A study by the Norwegian NGO Fafo, nearing completion, aims to clarify the actual number of refugees in Jordan and to shed more light on their needs -- although some NGOs were concerned about undercounting, since many refugees stay inside and might escape notice.

Access to Education and Other Services

The breakdown by religion of Iraqis registered with UNHCR in Jordan, where the government calls them “guests” to reinforce the idea that they are in the country only temporarily, includes 50% Sunni, 25% Shia, 15% Christian, mostly Chaldean, and other religious minorities. They run up against the same kinds of difficulties as elsewhere, most living without adequate support and aware that their illegal status leaves them open to detention and deportation should the government decide to enforce the law stringently.

Education was a particular concern during our visit, since the government had recently announced that only residents would be allowed to attend public schools, and the same policy would now apply to private schools as well – a restriction that had not been in force the previous school year. According to UNHCR and Ministry of Education statistics, some 13,000 to 19,000 Iraqi children had been enrolled in private schools, including religious schools. In early August, however, Jordan announced that all children could attend public schools, and that it would open 30 public schools to Iraqi children in certain densely-populated areas of Amman when schools opened August 19. This was a very welcome initiative. The goal of UNHCR and the Ministry of Education for this year for Jordan is an additional 50,000 refugee children in school.

UNHCR / UNICEF EDUCATION APPEAL

UNHCR and U.N. Children’s Fund (UNICEF) announced July 27 a \$129 million appeal to place Iraqi refugee schoolchildren in school in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt. Of an estimated 300,000 Iraqi school-age children in Syria, only about 33,000 are currently enrolled in school, although the government has given them full access. In Jordan, the government estimates that 19,000 Iraqi girls and boys are in school, while at least 50,000 do not attend. The goal of the appeal, which covers the period from August 2007 to the end of 2008, is to enable another 100,000 Iraqi children to attend school in Syria, 50,000 in Jordan, 2,000 in Egypt, 1,500 in Lebanon and 1,500 in other countries in the region. The U.S. Government announced August 28 a \$30 million contribution toward the appeal.

A number of NGOs, both local and international, are assisting the refugees. These include Caritas Jordan, CARE Australia, Save the Children, Mizam, and Mercy Corps. The International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) has been in Jordan since 2002 and provides assistance to vulnerable groups and Iraqi refugees in partnership with Caritas Jordan. The International Rescue Committee has just opened an office. The government keeps tight control over NGO activities, however, and incoming NGOs find it time-consuming, and often impossible, to get government permission to register and operate. UNHCR funds a small number of NGOs to provide services as implementing partners; for example, it supports projects by CARE (counseling and training) and Mercy Corps (refugees with disabilities). The U.S. State Department funds NGO programs as well, including those of ICMC, which assists extremely vulnerable individuals through support for Caritas Jordan centers and clinics in Amman and its environs.

Protection

Overall, Jordan presents a relatively safe and stable environment for the refugees. Religious tolerance is widespread, and extremists advocating violence are few. While the authorities do not recognize UNHCR-issued refugee certificates, they appear to give them some weight. (There was in mid-July a 6-week waiting period for the refugee cards, which need to be renewed every six months.)

Still, refugees in Jordan suffer from their lack of legal status, their inability to work, and the difficulty of providing for their daily existence. Some refugees reported threats received by telephone from Iraq. Women, less likely to be stopped by the police, were driven to seek menial work, often for extremely low pay. Children, too, were sometimes sent to work, and expected to stay long hours. Mandaean refugees reported being unable to practice their religious rituals due to discrimination against them. UNHCR Jordan felt that refugee protection was becoming ever more problematic.

Jordan says it resorts to detention and deportation of refugees only in cases involving criminality and security, respectively. Since one deportable offense is

“Shia proselytization,” it may be assumed that Shias are looked at more closely than others. UNHCR indicated that, although detentions were rising, the government notified UNHCR when UNHCR-registered refugees were detained, permitted access to them, and allowed UNHCR quietly to negotiate their release.

Resettlement

UNHCR Jordan, having recently expanded from 30 staff to 120, had by mid-June referred 3,500 Iraqi refugees for resettlement, including 2,275 to the U.S.

In Jordan, there is an additional path to U.S. resettlement. Jordan is the only host country that allows cases of former U.S. government employees to be presented directly to the United States; they simply apply at the IOM-run Overseas Processing Center in Amman, with no need to have been referred there by UNHCR.

This “direct access” program, announced by the State Department in June, responds to public concern about the targeting by violent extremists in Iraq of U.S. government interpreters and other employees by affording refugees in this group a faster way to U.S. resettlement.

SYRIA

Syria estimates that it hosts 1.4 million Iraqi refugees, more than any other country. Syria kept its borders open longer than any other receiving country, even after arrivals had reached an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 Iraqis a month. As of early September, however, Syria has announced a policy change that will require Iraqis to obtain a visa in Baghdad before entry to Syria is allowed, which will greatly restrict Iraqi’ ability to cross the Syrian border. Syria badly needs significant international assistance to cope with the refugee inflow. Poor relations between Syria and the U.S. complicate efforts to gain Syria’s collaboration for the U.S. refugee program, though Assistant Secretary of State Ellen Sauerbrey has in recent months had apparently constructive meetings with high Syrian officials.

Protection

Although refugees are required by law to go to the border every three months to renew their residence permits, most fear doing so, and the government has generally not enforced this rule so far. Detention cases, UNHCR told us, are few. There are no Syrian fines for overstaying that could complicate resettlement travel as long as the refugee is UNHCR-registered.

Assistance

Despite Syria's generosity, many refugees fear expulsion by the government and the great majority face acute hardship in their daily lives. The refugees' single biggest problem, according to UNHCR, is how pay their rent, which has risen two to three times since last year. Some husbands are leaving their wives and children in Syria to seek work elsewhere.

Education is also a prime concern. Although the government of Syria has given refugee children free access to schooling, only about ten percent (33,000 of an estimated 300,000) actually attend school due to the scarcity of classrooms and teachers, the need for many refugee children to work, and, in one case we saw, the lack of an Iraqi document certifying previous schooling. UNHCR has launched an education appeal, and hopes to have 50,000 more children in school in Syria by the end of the 2007 – 2008 school year. On August 28, the U.S. responded to that region-wide appeal with a \$30 million contribution, after having already launched a separate \$10 million education initiative for Syria and Jordan. Under the latter program, ICMC and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) will provide public, private and informal schooling for several thousand youngsters. In Syria, the two organizations will work through implementing partners Caritas Syria, Terre des Hommes, and St. Vincent de Paul.

Foreign NGOs, responding to the crisis, are starting up in Syria for the first time. Eight have now been endorsed officially by the government, and UNHCR hopes these will become its implementing partners. The next step in their acceptance process is affiliation with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). Whether the NGOs will be obligated to partner with SARC operationally is not yet clear.

National NGOs are also tightly regulated, and fall under the Ministry of Social Development.

Resettlement

Our Delegation visited UNHCR's new registration center seven miles outside Damascus, now its largest in the world. Although its location seemed inconvenient (UNHCR had had to leave Damascus due to the numbers arriving), the large, well-planned site and ample staffing seemed well suited to accommodate the inflow. We learned that up to July 8 a total of almost 101,000 refugees had been registered, and that an informal goal of 150,000 registrations had been set for the end of the year.

Of those registered, 35% were from Baghdad, while 49.4% were Sunni, 23.9% were Shia, 19.7% were Christian, and 5.4% were Mandeian. About half the Christians were Chaldean.

On the U.S. side, the Geneva-based International Organization for Migration (IOM), which runs the U.S. Overseas Processing Center in Syria, was setting up its operation in Damascus and getting ready to receive the referred cases that UNHCR had generated. U.S. immigration interviewers from DHS had already made one stop in Damascus, but we and UNHCR were disappointed to learn that they had approved for resettlement a relatively low percentage of the cases IOM had presented. In particular, a high percentage of women at risk, some 70 percent, had been rejected. UNHCR, which had referred the cases to the U.S. in the expectation that they would satisfy U.S. refugee and resettlement criteria, told us it was reviewing these cases carefully to try to determine the causes for their rejection.

Shelters for Women

We were struck by the need, in Syria and elsewhere, for shelters for women at risk and their children. *Terre des Hommes* Syria, with funding from Caritas Austria, is planning to build a shelter near the Syria – Lebanon border that will assist 100 women. The inspiring Good Shepherd Sisters, with UNHCR funding,

operate a small, ten-bed shelter in Damascus for mothers and their children, but told us the need was far greater.

Along with the refugee influx into Syria has come prostitution, which is increasing, according to UNHCR. The difficult living conditions are forcing a number of Iraqi refugee women and girls into prostitution as a last-resort effort to provide for their families. There were also reports of traffickers bringing women from Iraq for sexual exploitation. The problem, well recognized among Syrians, is especially alarming in summer, when Gulf State visitors arrive in large numbers reportedly seeking cheap, easily available prostitutes. We were told Iraqi women were being sent to the Gulf States for the same reason. UNHCR is considering how to respond, and told us it would work mainly in the area of prevention.

RESETTLEMENT CRITERIA AGREED BETWEEN UNHCR AND RESETTLEMENT COUNTRIES

Priority Profiles

1. Persons who have been the victims of severe trauma (including Sexual and Gender-based Violence), detention, abduction or torture by State or non-State entities in Iraq
2. Members of minority groups and/or individuals which are/ have been targeted in Iraq owing to their religious/ethnic background⁸
3. Women-at-Risk in countries of asylum
4. Unaccompanied or separated children, and children as principal applicants
5. Dependants of refugees living in resettlement countries
6. Older Persons-at-Risk
7. Medical cases and refugees with disabilities with no effective treatment available in the country of asylum
8. High profile cases and/or their family members
9. Iraqis who fled as a result of their association in Iraq with the Multi-national Force, Coalition Provisional Authority, United Nations, foreign countries, international and foreign institutions or companies and members of the press
10. Stateless persons from Iraq
11. Iraqis at immediate risk of *refoulement*, i.e., forced return to Iraq

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the U.S. Government

Every effort should be made to expedite the processing of the 7,000 refugee applicants referred recently by UNHCR; referrals from UNHCR should continue to be encouraged and accepted; and the Administration should send to Congress for FY-2008 a request for funding that includes provision for 25,000 Iraqi refugees in the next fiscal year. For the latter figure to be attained, additional resources must be provided.

While attention has (rightly) been paid to the need for education funding for refugees in Syria and Jordan, the need is no less acute for the lesser numbers of refugees in Turkey and Lebanon. In Turkey, government-registered refugee children have access to schooling, but lack the language to take advantage of it. In Lebanon, education funding should be provided, directly or through UNHCR, for all types of education, including public, private, and informal.

Iraqi refugees with relatives in the United States should be considered for U.S. resettlement on the basis of family reunification, dropping the requirement that they enter as refugees or migrants. This would leave UNHCR free to concentrate on other vulnerable cases.

To ensure greater acceptance of refugee women at risk, the current DHS practice of “cross-referencing” (linking the outcome of the woman’s case with that of the principal applicant) puts these women at a disadvantage if the principal applicant is rejected. The procedure should be reviewed, and, if possible, corrected. We believe the cases of vulnerable women should stand on their own.

We hope that ways will be found at our embassies to ensure a flow-through of refugee resettlement applicants sufficiently fast to ensure that DHS interviewers are able to process the maximum number during their limited stays in the host countries.

The U.S. should expand the “direct access” program for those with U.S. associations to include employees of U.S. contractors; and continued effort

should be made to persuade other host governments besides Jordan to allow direct-access processing for former U.S.-affiliated refugees on their soil.

Among the tens of thousands of Iraqis working for the U.S. government and U.S. contractors in Iraq today, many are in mortal danger. The U.S. should consider allowing them to apply in place for U.S. resettlement without having to make the dangerous and expensive trip to a nearby country, which may not admit them in any case.

For UNHCR

Implementing partners and other NGOs should be given further training to help them recognize which cases among their caseloads have protection needs and should be referred to UNHCR on those grounds. We encountered clear protection cases that had not been so referred.

All field resettlement officers should be made aware that the U.S. resettlement program does not have quotas for difficult medical cases, and that such cases should be referred to the U.S. program without regard to their medical problems. Overall, there are no limits on referrals that fit the agreed criteria, and we urge UNHCR to continue them at full speed.

“Best-interest determinations” should be pursued rigorously for children under 18 who are not with their parents and who, even if they are with relatives, could be in problematic situations.

For Iraq

The \$25 million pledged in June in Geneva for assistance to Iraqi refugees should be dispersed as quickly as possible, whether to UNHCR or the hosting governments.

For All Countries Hosting Iraqi Refugees

We ask that “guest” status for Iraqi refugees on your soil be regularized in some fashion so that they may live without fear of deportation until a permanent

solution has been found for them. If this is done in coordination with UNHCR, it will provide a new incentive for the Iraqis to register with UNHCR. This will create a more orderly framework for their assistance, resettlement, and, when conditions in Iraq change, voluntary repatriation. A more secure status for the Iraqis should be accompanied by increased resources from the international community to help you bear this difficult burden.

We ask, too, that you keep your borders open to those fleeing Iraq.

We encourage you to consider possibilities for the eventual local integration of at least some Iraqi refugees, including those with family among your citizens or with some other qualification that would seem to facilitate their integration.

For Turkey

We ask that the government of Turkey consider relaxing its policy of placing in the satellite cities particularly vulnerable people such as single mothers and the elderly.

We request that the government allow NGOs, churches, and other private entities to assist refugees wherever they are, to include the satellite cities.

We ask that you allow “direct access” for former U.S. government employees to the U.S. resettlement process in Istanbul.

For Lebanon

We request that the government, which admittedly has many serious problems to address, offer the refugees a status other than “illegal” (see above). At the least, refugees registered with UNHCR and carrying a UNHCR refugee certificate should not be subject to the dread of incarceration and deportation, as is now the case. This policy change would encourage refugees to register with UNHCR and allow the government better control over the refugee problem. If detentions do continue for certain cases, the government could consider entrusting more of them to organizations like Caritas Lebanon or ICMC, which can offer the refugees more humane treatment while remaining accountable to the government

for their whereabouts. This could be a solution for mothers with children and for others who pose minimal risk.

We ask you to permit “direct access” for former U.S. government employees to the U.S. resettlement process.

For Jordan

We urge Jordan to allow Iraqi asylum-seekers to cross its border in safety.

We ask that you establish policy and develop procedures that will allow national and international assistance organizations to provide services for needy people, including Iraqis.

For Syria

Syria’s generosity in accepting Iraqi refugees thus far, despite the hardships this has imposed on Syria, has been noted and appreciated around the world. We hope that Syria will maintain this exemplary policy.

We urge that you facilitate visas for NGO staff assisting Iraqi refugees and for U.S. immigration officers interviewing Iraqi resettlement applicants, so the important work of both can proceed. We hope that this will accompany a policy of allowing national and international organizations to operate in Syria on behalf of the needy, including Iraqis.

We ask that you allow “direct access” to the U.S. resettlement process in Damascus. This will not impede U.S. acceptance of a much larger number of other Iraqi refugees for resettlement in the U.S., and it will allow UNHCR to concentrate on other vulnerable Iraqis and enable the referral of more of them to resettlement countries.

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WITH GRATITUDE TO THOSE WHO ASSISTED OUR MISSION

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