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## Iraqi Refugees: Time for the UN System to Fully Engage

*“There is not enough attention on the fact that four million people have been displaced and they live in very, very difficult circumstances, some of them, both inside Iraq and outside Iraq.”*

*- Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, April 17, 2007*

Despite these words from the Secretary General, the United Nations has yet to respond adequately to the Iraqi refugee crisis. The UN regional response remains weak, and while the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) plays an increasingly positive role, other UN agencies have failed to be proactive in their response to the crisis. Coordination between agencies is inadequate, and leadership from UN Resident Representatives on the issue of Iraqi refugees has also been lacking. The UN as a whole must put the Secretary General’s words into action in the near future and exert the political and operational will to respond in a coordinated and effective manner to their needs.

Over two million Iraqi refugees now live in the Middle East, the vast majority in Jordan and Syria, with sizeable populations in Lebanon, Egypt, Iran and Turkey. Over the course of the past two years, the number of Iraqi asylum seekers has grown exponentially in Syria and Jordan, from 262,000 in December 2005 to 2.2 million today. In Syria alone, the number of Iraqis doubled between November 2006 and June 2007. Many of them had to flee Iraq in a hurry and left all their belongings behind. Even refugees who had some resources have quickly become impoverished as they are not allowed to work in their countries of asylum. UN agencies and NGOs operating in the region have identified many areas that demand immediate attention and large-scale assistance, such as education, healthcare, shelter and water and sanitation.

United Nations humanitarian and development agencies have been very slow to respond to the building crisis. Their

engagement is especially critical because in both Jordan and Syria it is extremely difficult for international non-governmental organizations to register and assist Iraqis. Therefore, UN agencies, which already have an established presence, are in a unique position to offer assistance and technical expertise to host governments.

As the lead agency for refugees, UNHCR has expanded its operations in the Middle East. Its 2007 appeal for 60 million dollars was a significant increase from its 2006 budget, and it has recently issued a further appeal, bringing its total 2007 budget for Iraqis to 123 million dollars. With these increased resources, UNHCR is increasingly able to speed up registration and increase the provision of assistance to vulnerable refugees. The growth of UNHCR’s program is encouraging and necessary. But it is not enough. UNHCR can not respond to this crisis on its own; other UN agencies must now act as well.

Education is one of the priority sectors in all countries hosting Iraqis. According to the Jordanian government, out of 200,000 Iraqi children, only 20,000 started the 2006-07 school year and of those, 6,000 failed to complete the year of study. Similarly, in Syria, 33,000 children are in school, less than 10% of the estimated number of Iraqi children there. In Lebanon, where an estimated 40,000 Iraqis have sought refuge, only 900 children attend school.

Although education is a priority for UNHCR, UNICEF, an agency well established in all three countries, has greater expertise in the matter, as well as good relationships with national governments. UNICEF is the logical organization

to take the lead on education and other child-related issues including protection.

UNICEF's response has been late and insufficient, however, especially in light of the new school year quickly approaching. Although it participated in Jordan and Syria in coordination groups for education (even leading the group in Jordan), its response continues to follow the lead of other agencies. In the spring of 2007, UNICEF issued an appeal for five million dollars for Jordan and two million for Syria. The appeal, which was issued with little prior coordination with UNHCR, is clearly insufficient for the needs in the region.

UNICEF must take a more prominent, proactive role in responding to Iraqi refugees' needs. With donor attention focused on education, and with the governments of Jordan and Syria demonstrating the political will to respond to the problem, UNICEF is in an ideal position to negotiate more access for Iraqi children in schools, assist governments in designing plans for the future, and carry out specific programs, such as paying teachers, renovating and constructing schools and assisting Iraqi families to send their children to school.

According to the UNHCR office in Damascus, 15% of registered Iraqis in Syria need food assistance. To respond to these needs, the World Food Program (WFP) issued an appeal for one and a half million dollars, hoping to be able to provide food assistance to 5,000 families on a monthly basis. WFP will provide these families with 12 dollars of assistance per month, and UNHCR will supplement it. But unenthusiastic donor response has forced WFP to limit its work to addressing a small portion of the needs in Syria. In Jordan, it is unclear whether WFP will get involved at all.

Other agencies, such as the World Health Organization, are also considering getting more involved, although most are still in the discussion phase. In Lebanon, UNHCR continues to be the only UN agency implementing any program for Iraqi refugees.

Political leadership from the highest ranks of the UN is needed to direct these agencies to become actively involved with Iraqi refugees in the Middle East, and programs need to begin in the short term. For individual UN agencies to be more effective, UN country teams must be mobilized. In particular, Resident Representatives must make responding to the needs of Iraqi refugees a priority.

As of now, there is a lack of effective leadership and coordination in all three countries. In Jordan, coordination is seen as UNHCR's role, although UNICEF has started being a more active participant. In Syria, the Resident Representative is noticeably absent from the discussions on Iraqi refugees' needs. In both countries, the UN country teams decided against issuing joint appeals, instead choosing to leave indi-

vidual UN agencies to issue their own. As a result, appeals are uncoordinated and smaller ones remain unfunded.

## **REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:**

### **The United Nations:**

- ❑ The Secretary General and the Emergency Relief Coordinator take a leadership role in directing cooperation between UN agencies, the establishment of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the region, and effective country team management.
- ❑ Operational agencies, such as UNICEF, the World Food Program, and the World Health Organization, make responding to Iraqi refugees' needs a priority of their work in countries hosting Iraqis; coordinate increased activities and appeals with UNHCR; and establish contingency plans to respond to the refugee crisis in the medium term.
- ❑ UN country teams in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon make responding to the Iraqi refugee crisis a priority; better coordinate the overall UN response in each country; and join UNHCR in advocating with host governments to respect the rights of Iraqi refugees.
- ❑ OCHA immediately establish a presence in the region to provide information and coordination support to UN agencies responding to the needs of Iraqi refugees.

### **Donor governments:**

- ❑ Fully fund all current and future UN appeals to respond to the Iraq displacement crisis;
- ❑ Engage directly with individual UN agencies and insist on their greater involvement in the region.

*Advocates Kristele Younes and Sean Garcia just returned from a one-month assessment mission to Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.*