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# Iraq

## The situation of Iraqi refugees in Syria

*An Amnesty International briefing*

### 1 Introduction

More than four years after the US-led invasion of Iraq, the conflict that continues to rage in the country has not only caused countless thousands of deaths and injuries but has provoked a continuing and increasing exodus of Iraqis displaced from their homes. Some two million or more have now left the country and almost two million others – out of a total Iraqi population estimated to be around 27 millions – are now living as internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Iraq having been forced from their homes. Some of these also can be expected to make their way to the country's border and become refugees abroad. It is a dire situation, one that carries grave humanitarian consequences for those directly affected but also a diverse and challenging impact on the neighbouring countries, notably Syria and Jordan, who now bear a critical responsibility for assisting the refugees. It is a crisis to which the international community at large, however, must respond. The governments and people of Syria and Jordan cannot be left to bear this responsibility alone.

Syria is the only country that has so far kept its border open to refugees fleeing the sectarian violence in Iraq. It is estimated that there are now some 1.5 million Iraqis living in Syria, with around 30,000 more arriving each month. The majority have arrived during the last 17 months following the bombing of al-'Askari Shi'a holy shrine in Samarra on 22 February 2006. This attack, apparently carried out by members of al-Qa'eeda in Iraq, severely damaged the shrine and also triggered a widespread intensification in the level of sectarian violence between Shi'a and Sunni armed groups.

Amnesty International sent a three-person fact-finding delegation to Syria between 13 and 30 June 2007 in order to investigate the situation of Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers. In particular, Amnesty International looked into their legal status, their access to services such as health, education and housing, the impact that the presence of Iraqi refugees is having on the local community and on the Syrian economy, and how the Syrian authorities have been responding to continuing influx of Iraqis. Amnesty International also sought to find out whether the pledges of economic and other assistance to Syria, and Jordan, the other main country of refuge for Iraqis, by governments that attended an international conference held on 17-18 April 2007 in

Geneva, have been honoured or not. At that conference, convened by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) specifically to address the potential humanitarian crisis arising from the flight of refugees from Iraq, governments were invited to assist Syria, Jordan and other countries affected in their efforts to afford protection and meet the other needs of the refugees. In the course of the visit, Amnesty International's delegates met with several senior Syrian government officials, including the Deputy Ministers for Foreign Affairs, Health, Education, Higher Education, and the Minister for Cooperation with the Red Crescent Society. They also met with representatives of some national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), United Nations (UN) agencies, such as UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and some European Union (EU) diplomats.

Amnesty International's delegates interviewed dozens of Iraqis of diverse backgrounds who had been forced to leave Iraq and had gone to Syria in search of safety. Most of them had personally suffered serious human rights abuses, including rape and other forms of torture, and were traumatized as a result but with no possibility to receive appropriate treatment.

This briefing summarizes the findings of Amnesty International's visit to Syria to assess the situation of refugees from Iraq. It includes a number of recommendations addressed to the Syrian, Jordanian and Iraqi governments and to the international community, particularly those states who pledged financial and other assistance at the April conference in Geneva to deliver on those pledges and to take further action to meet the needs of refugees and IDPs.

## **2 Numbers and categories of Iraqis**

Syrian government officials told Amnesty International that they estimate there are some 1.5 million Iraqis now living in Syria; UNHCR's estimate is a little lower, at around 1.4 million. These are considered approximations only, however, because there are no official statistics and no census has been conducted in recent times. Each day, Amnesty International was informed, some 2,000 Iraqis enter Syria through al-Tanf border checkpoint, of whom around half – some 30,000 each month – then remain in Syria. This indicates that Syria is the largest recipient of Iraqi refugees; Jordan, with an Iraqi community now estimated at around 750,000 is the second

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largest recipient. Other Iraqi refugees have arrived, but in much smaller numbers, in countries such as Egypt, Iran and Lebanon.<sup>1</sup>

Almost all of the Iraqi refugees interviewed by Amnesty International were recent victims of serious human rights abuses in Iraq and had felt they had no choice but to leave the country. They included Sunni Muslims who had been resident in predominantly Shi'a neighbourhoods in Baghdad or other towns and cities, and Shi'a Muslims who had lived in predominantly Sunni districts, but all had been forced to leave their homes as the areas were cleared through a process akin to "ethnic cleansing" by members of sectarian armed groups. As well, the refugees included members of religious and ethnic minority communities such as Christians, Sabians and Yazidis, who had also been forced to flee because of sectarian attacks. Some of the refugees had been among those taken hostage by armed groups, who had tortured them before releasing them, while others reported that members of their families had been taken hostage and killed. A few, including men as well as women interviewed by Amnesty International, disclosed that they had been raped – in some cases, they alleged that this had been done by members of armed groups, in others they said that members of the Iraqi security forces or soldiers belonging to the US-led Multi-National Force (MNF) were the perpetrators. Some of the refugees had left their homes after receiving threats from Sunni or Shi'a armed groups that they would otherwise be killed.

The Iraqis currently living in Syria also include many former members of the Ba'ath party and people who formerly were military or security officials under Saddam Hussain, Shi'a as well as Sunnis, who fled after he was toppled from power because they were targeted by armed groups. Some also went to Syria because they feared they would be arrested by the security forces of the new Iraqi government because they had served under the ousted Ba'ath regime.

Syria has long been a place of refuge for Iraqis. During Saddam Hussain's rule, thousands of people opposed to his government went into exile in Syria, including members of the current government and parliament of Iraq. Many were Shi'a and today one Damascus neighbourhood, Sayyeda Zeinab, is inhabited predominantly by Iraqi Shi'a although many Iranians also live there. Following the US-led invasion and the overthrow of Saddam Hussain, many of the Iraqis who fled to Syria were Sunnis from central and western Iraq, the area which had constituted Saddam Hussain's main powerbase. Sunnis continue to arrive. Also in the last 17 months large numbers of

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<sup>1</sup> According to UNHCR estimates, there are around 100,000 Iraqis in Egypt, 54,000 in Iran, 40,000 in Lebanon and 10,000 in Turkey.

Iraqi Christians and members of other minorities, such as Sabeans, have fled to Syria. Iraq's Christian community, mainly concentrated in the Jaramana district of Damascus, and the Sabean minority have felt themselves particularly vulnerable – caught in the middle of the sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shi'as but unable to obtain adequate protection from an Iraqi government which can barely function and without armed groups of their own to defend them against militant Sunni and Shi'a forces. Scores of Christians and Sabeans have been taken hostage and killed by armed groups, while a number of women were reported to have fled from Iraq to Syria because they were at risk of becoming victims of so-called honour crimes.

The high level of sectarian violence which has claimed thousands of lives in Iraq, particularly since February 2006, has not spread into Syria due, it seems, to a long established pattern in which Iraqis living in Syria have pulled together to help and support each other regardless of their ethnic or religious differences and to an awareness that the Syrian authorities will not tolerate acts of violence between or by Iraqis. In meetings with Amnesty International, Syrian officials made clear that violence between or by Iraqis would receive zero tolerance and that the Syrian authorities would crack down hard on those responsible. The officials did, however, express concern that there had been a small number of kidnappings among Iraqis.

### **3 Legal Status**

Until the end of 2006 Iraqis who entered Syria had their passports stamped at the border and were issued with three month visas. These could then be renewed for a further three months at any Syrian Immigration Department office in Damascus or another centre. This changed at the beginning of 2007, however, when the Syrian authorities reduced the length of the initial visa from three months to one month, this new visa being renewable for a further two months when it expired, again in Damascus or another centre with an Immigration Department office.

Once a visa has been extended for two months, and is about to expire, Iraqis are then required to leave the country and to obtain a new visa if they wish to re-enter. In practice, this means that many Iraqis travel to the border checkpoint in order to exit Syria, so obtaining an exit stamp, and then immediately re-enter, obtaining a new one month visa (renewable for a further two months) when doing so. This is a journey that takes about a day for most Iraqis by the time that they get back to their place of residence in Syria. For Iraqis who are poor, the journey is expensive and it is tiring, especially in the summer, for families who have to travel with their children to the border. Both the Syrian and Iraqi authorities are aware that this is going on but seem

content to turn a blind eye to it, and it is only in rare situations that an Iraqi can now obtain an extension of their visa beyond a total of three months in Damascus or elsewhere within Syria. Not all Iraqis extend their visas, however. Some of those interviewed by Amnesty International stated that they feared to travel to the border crossing point because they believed that members of armed groups, particularly members of the Mahdi Army loyal to Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, were operating just inside the Iraq side of the border and could pose a risk to them. Some suggested that Mahdi Army members were also present in Damascus.

Syrian officials told Amnesty International that a majority of Iraqis were staying in Syria irregularly, without up to date visas, but that this is tolerated by the Syrian government. They acknowledged that some cannot afford to make the journey to and from the border to collect a new visa, while others are fearful of presenting themselves to the authorities on the Iraqi side of the checkpoint.<sup>2</sup> In a few cases, Iraqis have been able to obtain one-year residencies; to do this they must be able to show that they have children already attending school in Syria and that they also have a long-term, usually one year, tenancy contract.

Syrian officials acknowledged that a number of Iraqis had been subjected to forcible return to Iraq but said that this had occurred after the Iraqis concerned had been accused of committing criminal acts although they were not charged or tried. Other sources alleged that there were cases of Iraqis who had been deported after they had got into a fight with a Syrian which had been reported to the authorities.<sup>3</sup> In general, however, Syria has maintained an open borders policy to most Iraqis and the number of deportations is believed to have been small. Palestinian refugees who were long term residents of Iraq and who seek refuge in Syria face particular problems, however.

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<sup>2</sup> Many Iraqis in Syria, especially those reasonably well off, do not want to apply for asylum or move to third countries because they believe they are in Syria on temporary basis and that one day they would go back to Iraq when the security situation permits. Others told AI delegates that they tried to go and register with UNHCR but they were put off by the long queues of asylum seekers outside the office.

<sup>3</sup> For example M. A. [name withheld] who had been detained by the MNF in Iraq came to Syria and worked at a private company (goods delivery). One day he had reportedly an argument with a Syrian employee. The Syrian employee complained about him. MA was then detained and taken to the Passport and Immigration Department where he was held for 3 days before he was deported to Iraq.

## 4 UNHCR-registered Iraqis

According to UNHCR officials, as of mid-June 2007 the agency had registered 90,000 Iraqis.<sup>4</sup> The largest number among those recently registered are Sunnis, followed by Shi'a and then Christians. Before the end of 2005, some 25,000 Iraqis were registered with UNHCR but this number had increased to 40,000 by the end of 2006. Until the end of March 2007, Iraqis who registered with UNHCR received temporary protection letters from the agency that were valid for six months and then renewable. However, since April 2007 UNHCR recognizes all Iraqis from the central and southern areas of Iraq as refugees on a *prima facie* basis; however, they are still interviewed by UNHCR protection officers in order to establish whether they are genuinely from one of these regions.

Iraqi asylum seekers who come from any of the three Kurdish governorates in northern Iraq are considered by UNHCR on a case by case basis to determine whether they have a well-founded fear of persecution. In practice, once such an asylum seeker goes to UNHCR office in Duma, outside Damascus, in order to register s/he is given a paper slip denoting that s/he has an appointment for interview. Currently, due to the pressure of cases, the interview itself takes place some eight or nine months later, unless the case is considered an urgent protection one. After the interview has been completed, if the person is from outside Kurdistan, they are given a one-year protection letter which helps the holder with easier access to services, especially health care if required (see below), and eventually to resettlement, especially for urgent cases.

UNHCR officials in Damascus told Amnesty International that they were about to submit the cases of 3,000 recognized refugees, mostly Iraqis, for resettlement to countries such as the United States (US), Australia, Canada, Norway and Sweden. The cases being proposed for resettlement were those of persons considered most vulnerable, including traumatized individuals, members of minority groups, survivors of torture, and women heads of households. Of these, highest priority was being given to individuals who could be at serious risk if they should be deported to Iraq.

UNHCR in Damascus has two telephone hotlines for people with urgent problems and who want to contact the agency. These include people who have been arrested and detained by the Syrian security forces and whose families have contacted

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<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of 2007 UNHCR launched a \$60 million appeal to fund its activities on hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons (IDP) for 2007. The new funds that subsequently arrived enabled the agency, among other things, to register more Iraqis in the last few months.

UNHCR for intervention. UNHCR officials informed Amnesty International that the agency endeavours to intervene on behalf of those who have already registered with UNHCR and others who have not. Further, if UNHCR becomes aware of cases of Iraqi refugees who have been arrested by the police on criminal grounds and whose deportation is likely, the agency seeks to ensure that their passports are not stamped in red by the Syrian authorities as this will effectively ban them from entering the country for five years.

The lists of those refugees nominated for resettlement by UNHCR in Damascus are passed on to the agency's Resettlement Hub in Beirut, which in turn sends them to the receiving countries.

Amnesty International interviewed several Iraqi refugees who stated that they had been told they would be resettled in the US, including some who had already been interviewed by IOM and officials of the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). The US has committed publicly to taking some 7,000 Iraqi refugees for resettlement by the end of 2007 and IOM has been commissioned to interview Iraqis already recognized as refugees by UNHCR as possible beneficiaries of this programme. Those whom UNHCR puts forward as candidates for resettlement in the US are interviewed by IOM and then by INS officers, who usually undertake security checks. Priority is given to those who have worked with the US military in Iraq such as translators, drivers and security guards, but others can be accepted so long as they are not considered by the US authorities to pose any security risk. As of mid-June 2007, IOM had interviewed about 700 Iraqis.

## **5 Iraqi refugees' access to services in Syria**

### ***a) Education***

According to UNHCR and to Syrian government officials there are no restrictions preventing Iraqi children from attending schools in Syria. In June 2007 there were reported to be some 32,000 Iraqi children, aged between six and 18, attending public schools and about 1,000 children attending private schools. Of these, some 30,000 were children in primary education, who are normally aged between six and 15, and the remainder, 3,000 children aged between 15 and 18 who were attending secondary education. Two thirds of the 33,000 total were attending schools in Damascus and its surrounding areas (Greater Damascus). There are 5.3 million children attending schools in Syria nationwide.

The total of 33,000 is a low number taking into account the well over one million Iraqi refugees in Syria and the proportion of these who are likely to be children of school-going age. This seems to be due to several factors. First, many Iraqi families are too poor to be able to buy materials and uniforms that their children require to attend school and need their children to take up work, although they are not formally allowed to do so, to contribute to the family's living costs. Secondly, many Iraqis arrived in Syria after September 2006 when it was too late to enrol their children in school for the 2006-7 academic year. Further, many families left their homes in Iraq hurriedly to escape the spiralling violence without having the time or opportunity to collect together important personal documents such as school and birth certificates. Consequently, they are unable to produce these records which are required when parents wish to register their children in schools in Syria. Also, some Iraqi children who were able to start attending schools in Syria are reported to have dropped out because of difficulties they faced in adapting to a Syrian school curriculum which differs from that in Iraq. For example, both French and English are taught from an early age in Syria, but not in Iraq.

Although a relatively small proportion of Iraqi refugee children are currently attending Syrian schools, Amnesty International was informed that many schools were already overcrowded with up to 50 pupils in a classroom. However, it is expected that there will be a significant increase in school attendance by Iraqi children when the new academic year commences after the summer. UNHCR is currently building three schools for Iraqi children which are expected to be ready in early 2008 and may fund the construction of further schools in future. Syrian officials told Amnesty International that 91 new schools were needed to accommodate comfortably the 33,000 Iraqi children already receiving their education, and that these would cost the equivalent of some 26 million US dollars to build with maintenance and running costs to be added.

According to Syrian officials interviewed by Amnesty International, the government annually spends, on average, some 300 US dollars on each Syrian student. This includes the upkeep of schools, purchase and maintenance of equipment, books and teachers' salaries. Adding some 33,000 Iraqi children to the existing school roll, they said, this would cost some 10.3 million US dollars per year. Apparently, UNHCR has provided 3.8 million US dollars to assist the Syrian authorities to meet the costs of building new schools and for equipment.

Currently, the number of Iraqis in higher education in Syria is much smaller. Some 471 Iraqis are studying at Syrian universities, of whom 80 are medical students and 60 are studying engineering. In addition to the 471, there are 305 Iraqis studying

in private universities. University education is low cost and open to Syrians as well as nationals from Arab countries, including Iraqis, if they hold an appropriate certificate, equivalent to the Syrian one. Iraqis interviewed by Amnesty International described the universities as too few and overcrowded and alleged that Syrian applicants generally were given priority for enrolment. At the higher education level also, some Iraqis were unable to enrol because they had left Iraq in haste, without bringing their academic certificates. The number of Iraqis attending Syrian universities is also expected to rise, possibly significantly, when the new university year begins in the autumn.

### **b) Health**

Until the end of 2005 all Iraqi nationals living in Syria, including refugees and asylum seekers, received free health care in government hospitals. However, the Syrian authorities then introduced a number of restrictions due to rising costs. Currently, Syrian officials assured Amnesty International that Iraqi refugees can receive free health care in government hospitals but must pay if they require treatment for certain serious illnesses, such as cancer or heart ailments because of the high cost of relevant medicines. In practice, many Iraqis rely on private clinics and hospitals which are largely funded and ran by charities, for medical treatment, although government hospitals continue to receive emergency patients who are treated for free. In addition, as a result of an agreement concluded between UNHCR and the Syrian Ministry of Health, Iraqis who are registered with UNHCR and have serious illnesses can receive treatment, including surgical operations, at clinics run by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society (SARCS). In such cases, UNHCR meets 80 percent of the treatment cost and the patient is responsible for paying the remaining 20 percent.

One serious gap is the absence of any provision for psychological counselling and other treatment of Iraqi refugees who have been directly exposed to human rights abuses. Amnesty International met a number of Iraqi refugees who were still apparently traumatized by the experiences they had been through, including both men and women who had been tortured and raped. On 19 July 2007 UNHCR publicly stated that during the past six months, more than one in five refugees interviewed by the agency in Syria had been registered as a victim of torture, and one in six had a serious medical condition.

Scores of Iraqis are receiving treatment for cancer in Syrian hospitals. In the last six months alone, 193 Iraqis commenced such treatment for cancer. According to Syrian officials, the average cost of treating Iraqi cancer patients is 1,365 US dollars

per year, per patient. UNHCR is negotiating with al-Baroni teaching hospital in Damascus to provide treatment to Iraqis suffering from heart disease and cancer.

Recently, UNHCR provided one million US dollars to the Syrian Ministry of Health, which has purchased nine ambulances for health centres in areas where there are heavy concentrations of Iraqi refugees. UNHCR is also working closely with the SARCS whom it assists financially. SARCS has two polyclinics, one in Sayyeda Zeynab and the other in Jaramana, with a third being built also in Jaramana. The Italian Red Cross has covered the costs of a number of surgical operations undertaken on Iraqis in the polyclinics run by the SARCS.

Several Christian charities provide in-house medical care and treatment to Iraqi refugees, including the Ibrahim al-Khalil Convent in Jaramana and Caritas. UNHCR sends some women victims of domestic violence to a shelter in a Catholic centre run by four nuns in Damascus.

Some Iraqi refugees told Amnesty International that they feared to go to hospital in case they should be asked to show their residency permits, which had expired and which they had not renewed. They were concerned that they could get into difficulties if the police were to find out that they had overstayed although they were aware that the Syrian authorities rarely deport Iraqis simply for overstaying.

### ***c) Food, housing and employment***

Iraqis registered with UNHCR receive a monthly ration of dry food. The SARCS distributes food provided by the World Food Programme (WFP) to 30,000 Iraqi refugees. Caritas also distributes food to Iraqis on behalf of UNHCR. The food basket includes rice, cooking oil and lentils, and other dry food items. In nutritional terms there is clearly an urgent need for fresh fruits, vegetables and meat. Both the SARCS and Caritas receive lists of recipient Iraqi refugees from UNHCR. A growing number of charities, Christian and Muslim, distribute meals to needy Iraqi families. However, the humanitarian assistance provided by UN agencies and the few national and international NGOs who are active currently is insufficient and reaches only a minority of the refugees. Many Iraqis interviewed by Amnesty International said they had received no food aid although their savings were now exhausted. One Iraqi woman said she had fled to Syria in November 2006 after her husband was kidnapped by an armed group in July 2006 and killed. She told Amnesty International: "I do not have any income here and all the savings I brought with me have almost exhausted now. My 12-year-old daughter and myself live in one room that we are renting from an Iraqi woman owner of the house, and we pay 5000 Syrian Pounds (US\$ 100) a month

for this room. I don't work and no one is helping us." Others provided similar accounts.

Iraqis who arrive in Syria normally stay with families, relatives or friends, at least for the first few days. Their sheer number and the impact that their presence has, particularly on housing and rental costs in Damascus, appears to be giving rise to growing resentment among the local Syrian population who blame Iraqis for the increase in the cost of living which they are experiencing. Many Iraqis have bought their own houses or apartments, fuelling a surge in housing prices, and many others have moved into rented accommodation, pushing up rental costs. However, many of the refugees are becoming increasingly impoverished and are struggling to meet the costs of their rent. Landlords, Iraqi as well as Syrian, are reported to be exploiting the situation in order to boost their income, especially during the summer when the demand for housing increases significantly due to the arrival of visitors from the Gulf.

When Iraqis cross the border their passports are stamped banning them from working. However, many Iraqis do take paid work illegally and they have become for local employers a cheap workforce. The Syrian authorities are aware but tolerate illegal working by Iraqis and have taken advantage of the presence of professionals such as medical doctors, teachers and engineers among the Iraqi refugees by issuing them with work permits and allowing them to take jobs in Syria.

Syrian officials expressed concern, however, that a growing number of Iraqi refugees were becoming involved in the sex trade as prostitutes or workers in sex clubs. Amnesty International was told that some Iraqi girls and women had been forced by their families to engage in prostitution to earn money to enable them to meet their daily costs, and there is concern that child prostitution and trafficking of Iraqi children is growing. The Syrian government has acknowledged the seriousness of this matter and is drafting new legislation in response with the assistance of IOM.

## **6 Palestinians from Iraq at the Syrian border**

Hundreds of long term Palestinian residents of Iraq who have fled the violence there remain in a particularly parlous position. They are surviving in makeshift camps close to the border between Syria and Iraq. Some 305 Palestinians are located at al-Hol camp, which is inside Syria near its north-eastern border with Iraq, but others have not been able to gain entry to Syria. These include some 350 Palestinians at al-Tanf camp, located in the area of no-man's land between the Syrian and Iraqi border and a further 1,050 who are living in very harsh conditions in al-Waleed camp, inside Iraq near the border with Syria. Those in al-Hol camp have been there since May 2006, having

been allowed to enter Syria when they were refused entry to Jordan. However, the Syrian authorities refuse to admit the other Palestinians, all of whom are long term refugees. The Palestinians' situation is particularly acute as their community has been seriously targeted by armed groups and militia in Iraq, who have carried out hostage-taking and killings. Currently, as many as 15,000 Palestinians are believed to remain in Iraq, mostly in Baghdad, where they continue to be at grave risk of serious human rights abuses. According to UNHCR dozens of Palestinian children in al-Waleed camp, and in Baghdad, are ill and in urgent need of medical treatment outside the war-stricken country.

## **7 Pledges made by the international community at the Geneva Conference**

An international conference on Iraqi refugees was convened by UNHCR in Geneva on 17 and 18 April 2007. The conference was called in response to the growing humanitarian crisis facing Iraqi refugees and IDPs and its impact on the countries neighbouring Iraq, notably Syria and Jordan. Prior to the conference, UNHCR had launched several public appeals seeking urgent financial contributions from states to assist the agency to meet the needs of the great numbers of Iraqi refugees entering Syria and Jordan, and the conference itself was aimed to improve the response to these appeals. In Geneva, many states pledged financial assistance to assist both UNHCR and the Syrian and Jordanian host governments. Some also pledged to accept Iraqi refugees for resettlement in their own countries.

In Syria, however, Amnesty International was informed that many of these pledges remain unfulfilled. Syrian government officials said that by June 2007 no state had provided financial assistance bilaterally to Syria to assist it to meet the costs of providing services to Iraqi refugees. They said that a commitment made by Iraq's Foreign Minister at the Geneva conference, to provide 25 million US dollars to support health and education services for Iraqi refugees in both Syria and Jordan, and to set up five offices to carry out needs assessments for Iraqis, had not as yet materialised. In early July, underlining the continuing problem, UNHCR issued a new appeal to the international community to provide financial support to Syria and Jordan in bilateral agreements.

## **8 Conclusion and recommendations**

Syria has a long record of hosting Iraqi refugees. Before 2003, any opponents of Saddam Hussain's regime lived in and used Syria as a base for political opposition

activities and Iraqis from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds were welcomed in Syria. Some of these Iraqis returned home following the 2003 US-led invasion which overthrew Saddam Hussain, including some who joined the new government. However, they have been replaced by hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who have fled to Syria, particularly since the increase in sectarian violence which followed the 22 February 2006 attack which partly destroyed the Shi'a holy shrine in Samarra.

Despite the huge and continuing influx of refugees, the Syrian authorities have kept the border open and are to be greatly commended for this. They have also allowed Iraqi refugees to send their children to school and are making arrangements for a significant increase in school attendance by Iraqi children after the summer. Medical and other assistance has also been made available, with the assistance of UNHCR and the involvement of the SARCS. But the situation remains acutely difficult and the need for greater international assistance is undiminished. Indeed, as refugee numbers continue to swell, in Jordan as well as in Syria, and the refugees' own financial resources run out the need for international assistance to assist the host governments to meet the refugees' needs is likely to continue to grow. As well, urgent steps are needed to develop more generous refugee resettlement programmes in a number of countries, particularly those contributing forces to the US-led Multi-National Force in view of the risks to which Iraqis who have assisted those forces as drivers, translators and other ways are now being exposed. Particularly vulnerable, refugees need, as soon as possible, to benefit from resettlement programmes and to have an opportunity to rebuild their lives – many of which have been shattered by the abuses to which they were exposed in Iraq.

It is vital that people fleeing the conflict and violence in Iraq are able to obtain refuge abroad, and that countries such as Syria and Jordan maintain open borders to facilitate this. However, these countries must not be left to cope alone with the crisis, a crisis not of their making, and international assistance must be afforded to them urgently to assist them to carry out their responsibilities and obligations under international refugee and human rights law.

To this end, Amnesty International makes the following calls:

**To the government of the Syrian Arab Republic:**

1) Keep open its border with Iraq, and to not impose any form of entry restrictions at the present time for those fleeing Iraq;

- 2) Articulate its needs in dealing with the current crisis and inform the international community, especially the US, UK, EU and other states that have the capacity to assist, of such needs;
- 3) Reconsider requirement for Iraqis refugees having to return to Iraq and re-enter to extend their legal stay in Syria;
- 4) Not to forcibly return Iraqis at risk of human rights violations back to Iraq in breach of international law
- 5) Allow Palestinians stranded at the border to enter Syria and to work closely with UNHCR and UNWRA with a view to finding a long-term solution for the Palestinian refugees.

**To the government of the Kingdom of Jordan:**

- 1) Stop all forcible deportations of Iraqis to Iraq, including those who have not registered with UNHCR;
- 2) Keep open its border with Iraq and desist from turning away any Iraqis fleeing the violence;
- 3) Articulate its needs in dealing with the current crisis and inform the international community, especially the US, UK, EU and other states that have the capacity to assist, of such needs;
- 4) Publish as soon as possible the results of the census of the Iraqi population that it has undertaken lately with the assistance of a Norway-based organization.

**To the government of Iraq:**

- 1) Implement fully and without delay its commitment to make available substantial financial assistance to help address the needs of Iraqi refugees in Syria and Jordan;
- 2) Assist the governments of those host countries to address the protection, health, housing, education, social and other needs of the refugees.

**To the international community, in particular the governments of the US, European Union and other states that have the resources and capacity:**

1) Urgently start providing financial, technical, and in-kind assistance to the governments of Syria and Jordan as promised at the UN conference on Iraqi refugees in Geneva in April. Such assistance should be provided as part of an inclusive package that benefits Syrians and Jordanians as well as Iraqi communities to avoid resentment among the populations of Syria and Jordan;

2) Share the responsibility by resettling Iraqis from Syria and Jordan, giving priority to the most vulnerable cases in accordance with UNHCR guidelines on the resettlement of Iraqi refugees. This should go far beyond token numbers and should constitute a significant part of the solution to the current crisis;

**To UNHCR:**

1) Ensure that traumatized Iraqis who are victims of torture and rape receive expert treatment either in Syria or in the countries of resettlement.

2) Continue to explore resettlement opportunities with states worldwide, with a particular focus on providing durable solutions for refugees from vulnerable groups.