

International conference highlights plight of Iraqi refugees

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An international conference on the humanitarian crisis caused by the US invasion of Iraq was held in Geneva, Switzerland, on April 17 and 18. The forum discussed a submission by a number of non-government organisations (NGOs) documenting the needs of more than eight million Iraqis for “immediate assistance and protection”.

The NGO submission was an indictment of the US occupation. “While horrific violence dominates the lives of millions of ordinary people inside Iraq, the displacement, malnutrition, chronic poverty and illness that have been increasing over the last four years are crippling the lives of hundreds of thousands more. The protection vacuum that characterises much of Iraq has resulted in huge unmet needs and a denial of fundamental rights. The people of Iraq have a right to humanitarian assistance, but this right is being neglected,” it stated.

The statistics presented at the conference are staggering when one considers that Iraq was previously one of the most developed nations in the Middle East. Over 50 percent of the population lives on less than \$US1 per day. At least four million are assessed as being “food insecure”—meaning they live on the verge of starvation. An estimated 28 percent of Iraqi children suffer from malnutrition and 10 percent are suffering from chronic disease or illness. Iraq now has the highest mortality rate for children under five in the Middle East.

While the submission mentioned the violence that confronts Iraqis, it did not speak concretely of the number who have been killed or maimed due to the US occupation. The American forces and the Iraqi government have both refused to collate or release statistics. The independent survey conducted by Johns Hopkins University, however, arrived at the estimate that 655,000 people lost their lives from March 2003 to June 2006—approximately 2.5 percent of the pre-war population.

Occupation troops were directly responsible for close to

one third of the deaths. The US invasion is just as responsible for the sectarian conflicts in Iraq that have led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. Extremists from among the Sunni population, which formed the majority of the pre-invasion upper and middle classes and has been marginalised under US rule, are conducting a murderous campaign against Shiites, blaming them for the Shiite-dominated puppet regime in Baghdad. Shiite militias, many operating from within the US-trained and equipped Iraqi security forces, have retaliated by indiscriminately slaughtering Sunnis.

The daily threat of death or injury, combined with the social catastrophe facing the Iraqi people, has caused at least two million to flee the country. An estimated 1.9 million Iraqis are considered to be internally displaced, forced from their homes by violence or poverty.

The majority of those who have left the country are people who had some financial means. Close to 40 percent of Iraq’s middle class—university-educated professionals such as doctors, teachers, engineers and managers—is believed to have gone into exile, rather than continue to risk their lives in Iraq’s cities and towns. Iraqis now make the largest number of asylum applications in the world.

Close to 1.2 million Iraqis are believed to be taking refuge in Syria—a neighbouring country where until now they were able to enter with little difficulty and had access to some social services. Jordan, which also borders Iraq, has taken in over 750,000 Iraqi émigrés. Over 100,000 have taken refuge in Egypt. A further 200,000 have fled to the Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. Close to 50,000 are living in Iran and 40,000 in Lebanon.

Syria, a country of just 16 million people, is being transformed by Iraqi migration. According to Syria’s deputy prime minister for economic affairs, Abdallah Dardari, the refugee inflow from Iraq has increased the

population by 7 percent. Electricity usage in Damascus has jumped by 16 percent in the past 12 months. Suburbs in the Syrian capital have been dubbed “Little Fallujah” and “Little Mosul,” after the cities from where thousands of Iraqi exiles come.

Close to 40,000 more Iraqis enter Syria each month. Dardari told the BBC: “This influx has had a negative effect on the Syrian economy and has increased the pressure on national resources.” More than 75,000 Iraqi children are enrolled in Syrian schools. The Syrian government estimates that providing medical care and education to the refugees is costing one billion dollars per year. It appealed at the last week’s conference for emergency assistance of \$256 million.

The government of Jordan appealed for financial aid as well. Iraqi refugees have swollen the country’s population by more than 10 percent. Large numbers have overstayed their temporary visitor visas and live in constant fear of deportation. The Jordanian regime has become increasingly punitive as the flow of refugees has heightened economic pressures. Many have exhausted their resources and are sinking inexorably into poverty. Iraqis aged between 20 and 40 have now been banned from entering the country. Others who are allowed to enter have to prove they have sufficient money to support themselves. A 12-month work permit, for those who can get one, costs \$225—an amount equal to a month’s pay for many jobs and out of reach for many refugees.

The majority of the refugees in both Syria and Jordan are Sunni Arabs who fled in response to their marginalisation by the US occupation. Concerns that an increasingly volatile Iraqi refugee population will destabilise states across the Middle East are a major factor in the international focus on the crisis. Last November, Kenneth Pollack and Daniel Byman of the US Brookings Institution authored an article for the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled “Iraq refugees: carriers of conflict”.

The article stated: “All too often, where large numbers of refugees go, instability and war closely follow... Most Iraqi refugees are not in camps, but dispersed among local populations. But refugees, whether in camps or not, can also corrode state power from the inside, fomenting the radicalisation of domestic populations and encouraging rebellion against host governments. The burden of caring for hundreds of thousands of refugees is heavy, straining government administrative capacity and possibly eroding public support for regimes shown to be weak, unresponsive or callous. And the sudden presence of armed fighters with revolutionary aspirations can lead

disaffected local clans or co-religionists to ally with the refugees against their own government, especially when an influx of one ethnic or religious group upsets a delicate demographic balance, as would likely be the case in some of Iraq’s neighbours.”

Pollack and Byman warned that the Syrian Baathist regime, the pro-US Jordanian monarchy and the Saudi monarchy were particularly vulnerable to a challenge by Sunni extremists drawing support from Iraqi émigrés. The Sunni elite in Kuwait was potentially threatened by an influx of Shiite refugees from southern Iraq, that “could stir the country’s Shiites to rise up against the ruling Sunnis”.

In the past several months, both the *New York Times* and the British *Financial Times* have published editorials demanding that the Bush and Blair administrations provide the resources that refugee agencies need to even begin to provide assistance to Iraq’s displaced population. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), for example, has appealed for \$60 million in emergency funds—an amount the *FT* noted was “the equivalent of what the Pentagon spends every five hours on an occupation that cannot establish security and a reconstruction effort that can barely turn on the lights”.

The dire warnings being sounded and the profound problems confronting Iraqis outlined at the conference are in marked contrast to the pitiful aid being offered to Iraqi refugees. Of the \$60 million, just \$9.1 million in actual cash has been given.

The Bush administration, which is responsible for creating this humanitarian disaster, has made no response to the Syrian and Jordanian appeals for aid. Over the past four years, the US has resettled just 466 Iraqi refugees. In response to condemnation at home and internationally, the Bush administration announced in February that 7,000 Iraqis would be admitted this year—less than were taken in by Sweden in 2006.



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