

Unheard Voices: Iraq's growing Humanitarian & Refugee Crisis

Since the bombing of the Askariya Shrine in Samarra ignited a full-fledged civil war between Sunni and Shi'a forces in February 2006, the conflict in Iraq has taken a dramatic turn for the worse. Now Iraq has generated more refugees than any other country in the world and the conflict has affected all peoples from all communities within Iraq. Five years after the US-led invasion of Iraq the UNCHR estimates there are 2.2 million refugees in neighbouring states (predominantly in Syria and Jordan), over 2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and a further 41,000 refugees (including Palestinian, Syrian and Iranian Refugees) remaining within Iraq. **This refugee situation represents the largest urban population that UNHCR has ever had to respond to.** (UNHCR Supplementary, 2008).

Christians in Iraq

Accused of siding with Kurdish and coalition forces and being modern day crusaders, Iraq's Christian population, which stood at well over one million before the war, has been increasingly targeted by extremists and insurgents. Church bombings, kidnappings, extortion, beheadings, rape and forced taxation for being non-Muslim have forced hundreds of thousands of Christians to leave. However, their plight has received little public media debate or attention. In 1978, Saddam Hussein declared that there were only Kurds and Arabs in Iraq and those who asserted their Assyrian identity (one of the most ancient and indigenous nations in the region) were at risk of the death penalty.



Sometimes referred to as Chaldeans and Syriacs, the Assyrians identify themselves by ethnicity as well as religion, adopting Christianity soon after its inception. Today Assyrians are not safe anywhere in Iraq being targeted by Muslims due to their faith and Kurds because of the claim to their ancient Assyrian homeland. Estimates put Christian refugees at between 30- 40% of all Refugees from Iraq while only representing 3-4% of the population.



Mandaeans are followers of John the Baptist. Like Assyrians they have faced increased persecution since 2003 with some estimates saying their numbers have dwindled to 5,000 from 60,000 in 2003.

The Current Refugee situation



Over 4 million people are displaced; up to 650,000 Iraqis have died from war related causes. UNHCR and NGOs have reported a marked decline in the well-being of both IDPs and refugees and more Iraqi families are also being forced to move for a second or third time. Child malnutrition rates have risen from 19% before 2003 to 28% and only 30% of Iraqis have access to adequate water supplies (compared to 50% in 2003) while 80% lack effective sanitation.

The urban nature of their situation makes it difficult for the UN & Aid agencies to determine their needs, deliver aid and can lessen the priority to find solutions as they are not as visible and seen as less needy. In response, the National Council of Churches in Australia's international aid arm - **act for peace** - along with other NGOs, has been urging UNHCR to revise and release a new policy on urban refugees.

The need for Increased Resettlement and Humanitarian Assistance

Despite escalating violence UNHCR say that statistics show it has never been more difficult for Iraqis to find protection in industrialized countries (UNHCR, Newsletter 146). Australia has resettled over 10,000 Iraqi refugees over the past five years. Other resettlement countries, most notably the US,

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have been slower with fewer than 500 Iraqis being admitted up until 2007 when it agreed to take 7,000. The UK recently has been heavily criticised for returning asylum seekers to Iraq claiming the situation has stabilised.

While resettlement is one durable solution and the Assyrian Community (a refugee community in Australia from the 1960s onwards see <http://www.assyrianrc.com/>) provides a resilient and successful example of what these communities can achieve, resettlement alone is not enough.



Having received little international assistance to ease the burden, the ability and tolerance within Middle Eastern countries to host large refugee numbers is now wearing thin. Syria and Jordan are becoming increasingly restrictive with regard to entry, stay and access to social services. The funds needed to care for Iraqi refugees (UNHCR are seeking US \$261 million for 2008) is a tiny fraction of what the US spends on the war – estimated at US \$200 million per day. Without this international support, these host states will come under increasing pressure to remove refugee rights.

Having led the intervention in Iraq, Coalition Governments, the US in particular, now have a responsibility for ensuring that Iraqi civilians caught up in the violence have adequate protection and assistance. Although the Rudd Government has withdrawn troops from Iraq, Australia has an ongoing responsibility for civilians caught up in the violence unleashed by the war.

Reference & Source Material

Primary source material:

1. Refugee and Migrant Sunday – http://www.ncca.org.au/act_for_peace (All information from this source unless stated)

Secondary source material:

2. UNHCR Supplementary 2008 - <http://www.unhcr.org/partners/PARTNERS/477b8f744.pdf>
3. UNHCR Newsletter 146 - <http://www.unhcr.org/publ/PUBL/461e4a6c2.html>
4. Interviews, photos & comments from Assyrian Community in Australia.

What can you do?

Pray for:

- Peace in Iraq
- for Assyrian Christians, Mandaean, and all Iraqi refugees
- for a greater response by the world community to the needs of Iraq's peoples
- for the *House of Welcome* and all those working with refugees across the world

Write to your local parliamentarian and ask the Australian Government to:

- 1) 'recognise' the extent of the humanitarian crisis and ensure that adequate funds are available to address immediate humanitarian needs and later durable solutions;
- 2) significantly increase support for host countries, in particular, Jordan and Syria, and ensure that assistance is predicated on upholding refugee rights, entitlements and assistance.
- 3) continue to resettle those in greatest need of resettlement from Iraq, focusing on:
 - a) refugees inside Iraq such as Palestinians stranded at the borders or fleeing Iraq
 - b) Iraqis persecuted due to their associations with the Iraqi Government and Coalition forces;
 - c) vulnerable Iraqi minority groups such as the Assyrian and Mandaean Communities;
 - d) women and children at risk,

For More Information

Visit the Refugee & Migrant Sunday Resource Kit at http://www.ncca.org.au/act_for_peace

Are you in Sydney? Come along to *Unheard Voices: Australia's role in Iraq's growing Refugee Crisis* - A joint NSW Ecumenical & Centre for Peace & Conflict Studies, Sydney University public seminar on August 28th, 2008 at 6.00pm - see www.nswec.org.au for more information.