



LIVING AN ORDINARY LIFE CHALLENGING IN IRAQ

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As the war in Iraq enters its fifth year, aid agencies and international relief groups have raised the alarm about the growing problems faced by the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis forced to flee their neighborhoods and sometimes their country.

Iraqis moving from their homes both inside and outside the country are becoming the world's fastest-growing population of refugees and displaced persons in the world.

The United Nations estimates that about 727,000 have been displaced within the country since the bombing of a sacred Shiite shrine in February 2006 that set off a wave of sectarian violence.

The Iraqi Ministry of Displacement and Migration says that 470,000 displaced persons have officially registered with them since the fall of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein but most experts say that number is low.

Living fearful lives

The flood of refugees has been fueled by the widespread and brutal violence that have targeted both Shiite and Sunni Muslims.

"When you decide to leave your home and everything you have built up over life, you only decide to leave it when you're really, really scared," said Astrid Van Genderen Stort, spokesperson for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

And relief workers warn that even after people flee, their problems are not over.

In addition to the difficulties associated with moving, displaced Iraqis -- many of whom are women without husbands, because the men have been killed, went abroad to find work, or abandoned the family -- are struggling to find jobs to support their families. There isn't reliable health care, food is scarce and children go without schooling.

Sectarian violence

Many people are forced to flee their neighborhoods and homes because of sectarian violence -- that is violence by radical members of one religion targeting believers of another.

These attacks have systematically ruined many neighborhoods in Iraq that were at one time made up of families that were Sunni and others that were Shiite.

But as tensions and violence between extremists in both groups increased, neighborhoods became distinctly more Sunni or more Shiite. Families that make up the minority group in the area have been threatened or even killed.

"I always think I'm going to be a victim," Hazim Said, a Shiite man who returned his family to a Sunni dominated neighborhood in Baghdad and stays up all night guarding them, told the New York Times.

"Even now," he added, "I expect to be killed by them."

Many are worried that the new ethnic divisions in the country will have long-term impact on Iraq's future stability.

"People are sort of losing hope for return and the re-establishment of a multi-ethnic order," said Kathleen Newland, co-director of the Migration Policy Institute.

New security plan

The Iraqi government, led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, has said that resettlement of displaced Iraqis is a main priority and part of the country's new security plan. It estimates that 2,000 families have returned to homes in Baghdad since the program began in February.

But experts say the program is heavily dependent on U.S. troops and many believe the government's numbers are too high.

Despite the security and logistical challenges, many Iraqis still feel the pull of home.

"Without this house, I have nothing. That's the only way I can express it to you," Said told the New York Times.

As people struggle to move home or build new lives elsewhere, aid officials are urging U.S. and U.N. agencies to do more to help.

Refugees International said that one practical step would be to allow Iraqis to receive food and fuel rations even if they move to new places, the New York Times reported.

Currently the rules, started during the U.N. oil-for-food program in the 1990s, don't allow rations to move with people.

The refugee problem

In addition to those Iraqis displaced within the country, approximately 2 million Iraqis have fled the country as refugees, according to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees. Most have crossing the border into neighboring countries Syria and Jordan.

About 750,000 Iraqis have fled to Jordan, a country with 6 million people and 1 million Iraqis have gone to Syria, population 19 million.

Not many Iraqi refugees are coming to the United States, only 466 since the war began. The government has said that increased homeland security screening is part of the problem. But in February it announced plans to resettle 7,000 Iraqis in this country this year.

Refugees outside Iraq face different problems, deportation being high on the list. Getting jobs can also be difficult as not all countries that allow refugees allow them the right to work.

And many countries wonder how long the Iraqis will stay.

"The welcome mat is not so pristine as it was," said Andrew Harper, who does refugee work in Iraq for the United Nations. "Neighboring countries have been extremely generous ... but there is an increasing impatience as to how long the Iraqi population will remain."

-- *Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra*

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