



Guest Editorial

A Forgotten Humanitarian Crisis

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(AINA) -- I am writing this article from Jeramana, a suburb of Syria's capital Damascus. The desperation in such places, where many Iraqi refugees have taken refuge, is growing by the day. There has been no rain in Syria for the last twelve months, a country with a population still living largely from agriculture. Some Syrians accuse the Iraqi refugees using the example that the price of meat has increased by 120 percent. Other Syrians agree that it is harder to live in Syria but say that they still are happy to share their bread with the victims of a horrible war.

The Syrian government regards the refugees as guests who are allowed to use public health facilities and send their children to the public schools. But if they don't have a valid permit, something the majority lack, they are not allowed to work. A Syrian work officer told me yesterday they don't chase after Iraqis who work illegally; "but it cannot continue since they are taking jobs from Syrian citizens". Murwan earns circa 250 dollars per month. He works 9 hours a day and on the average, six days a week. Being an engineer he belonged to the middle class in Iraq. He has not much left of his savings after living as a refugee for two years. The rent for the small apartment where he lives with his wife and children is 250 dollars per month. They have nothing over after the rent is paid. Most Iraqis are in the same situation, or worse.

In Jordan, Iraqis I met told me they are afraid to work because they can be deported. They have remained alive thanks to the aid from UNHCR and other private organizations. Relatives and friends in the Netherlands, U.S., Sweden and other places send them money. But for how long? And at the UNHCR I meet frustration, the organization is out of money.

More than four million Iraqis have fled their homes, two millions within Iraq and two to the neighboring countries Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Official numbers disclose that there are more than one million Iraqis in Syria and 750 000 in Jordan. No one knows exactly how many. The UNHCR has registered 207 000 Iraqi refugees in Syria. The fact that not all are registered depends on, according to the UN press secretary, the lack of trust the Iraqis have towards the UN. Many also don't even know of the possibility of registering.

Those who are in touch with the UN hope to get out of the Middle East. Many Iraqis registered themselves when the UN ran an ad in February 2007 informing that they could get status of quota refugees through a special program and be transferred. They believed in a mass resettlement to the U.S., Europe and Australia. But only 11 492 have received criteria of resettlement and only 1 123 have left Syria through the UN. The Iraqis have now lost hope. "But many have returned to Iraq", an American colleague told me in Amman last week. That isn't correct, it's only a couple of hundred who have returned. Images of the same group of returning Iraqis has filled TV screens around the world and given the impression that many Iraqis are returning.

The UN has prepared some statistics on how many of the Iraqis have post traumatic stress syndrome. They have compared the results with other current wars and also with the war in Vietnam. The numbers are frightening. No other war has caused so much damage to the individual as the war in Iraq. One of four refugees has someone in their family who has been kidnapped, killed, raped or threatened to death; many of those are children under the age of fifteen.

The refugees want to create a future in a "safe country". The only way to safety that they have left is through paying smugglers of human beings. As Europe catches more and more of these smugglers in order to stop this kind of organized crime which is on the rise, the Iraqis become more vulnerable. They still take the chance. To pay tens of thousands of dollars to a smuggler is seen as the only alternative to the suffering in Syria and Jordan. The money is collected by selling everything they own and borrowing from everyone they know. In most cases they never reach Sweden or other countries because they are caught on their way, in Turkey for example, and are forced to return to Baghdad, and then back to Syria or Jordan.

UNHCR has minimum resources to maintain its aid. What are we going to do to solve the refugee situation in Iraqs neighbouring countries?

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