



## **Buses Take Iraqi Refugees Home From Syria**

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DAMASCUS, Syria (CNN) -- Convoys of buses carrying Iraqi refugees are heading from Damascus to Baghdad, marking the first time that some of the 1.5 million Iraqis who fled to Syria are returning home as part of an organized plan.

The repatriation effort, sponsored by the Iraqi government, began Tuesday and is expected to last a few days, Iraqi officials said.

The convoys will travel nearly 500 miles. Iraqi forces will protect the convoys once they cross into Anbar province and will accompany the buses to the capital.

"I want to leave because the security situation in Iraq is much better and the atmosphere is less dangerous," Abu Ali, a refugee from Baghdad, is quoted as saying in a report from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

But a fellow refugee told the UNHCR he had no choice but to take a bus back to Baghdad.

"The money is finished and my visa has expired," Ahmed Hussein is quoted as saying by the UNHCR.

The refugee agency reports that monetary considerations, including lack of work in Syria and expired visas, are cited by 70 percent of refugees as why they are returning to Iraq.

The first wave of 800 refugees, which left Damascus on Tuesday, is expected to arrive in Baghdad on Wednesday, Iraqi government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh said.

The refugees are being repatriated this week because security in Baghdad has improved in recent months, according to the Iraqi government.

"It's hopefully safer, that's what was on TV," said Ammar Jassem Ali, 26, who fled to Syria with his family after a series of attacks. His sister Ahlam was kidnapped and presumed dead. In less than a year, Ammar's impoverished family ran out of money in Damascus.

A U.S. military officer announced Monday that security is "dramatically improving" in a notoriously perilous stretch of neighborhoods in northeastern Baghdad, with attacks decreasing by 75 percent since the beginning of May.

But Sybella Wilkes of the United Nations' refugee agency expressed concern about the timing of the Iraqi government's repatriation effort.

"We of course would love to see a day when Iraqis could go back. We're just not sure that today is a day that the majority of Iraqis can feel they can go back," she said.

Asked about those concerns, al-Dabbagh stressed that the decision rests on the individual Iraqis.

"The government is not forcing anyone to return but is encouraging them to do so," he said. "The Iraqi government will do its best to protect these families."

He pointed out that 60,000 Iraqi refugees have returned on their own in the past month. More than 2 million Iraqis fled to Syria and Jordan because of the violence in Iraq, which accelerated in February 2006, when the Askariya Mosque in Samarra was bombed.

That bombing caused Iraqi sectarian conflict "on a scale never seen before," according to the Iraqi Red Crescent.

In addition to the flight of Iraqis to neighboring countries, the sectarian conflict prompted widespread internal displacement with Shiites fleeing Sunni areas, Sunnis fleeing Shiite areas and Christians fleeing Sunni areas to Kurdish areas.

As part of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's repatriation plan, the Iraqi government is paying for all travel costs for the Iraqi refugees to return from Syria, al-Dabbagh said. In addition, each family will receive \$800 to help resettle, he said.

Other developments

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- A woman wearing an explosive belt blew herself up in Baquba, wounding seven American soldiers and five Iraqis, the U.S. military said Wednesday. Victims of Tuesday's rare female suicide bombing were airlifted by helicopter to a hospital for treatment, the military said in a written statement. The attack is under investigation, the statement said.
- In Baghdad, the U.S. military also is investigating Tuesday's deadly shooting at a checkpoint in the Shaab neighborhood. U.S. troops fired warning shots at a minibus as it approached the checkpoint, killing two women and wounding four other civilians, said Maj. Bradford Leighton with Multi-National Force Iraq during a briefing for reporters Wednesday.

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