

Statement by Mr. António Guterres, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Conference on Addressing the Humanitarian Needs of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons inside Iraq and in Neighbouring Countries

Geneva, 17 April 2007

Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, through the unending flow of images and articles in media around the world, Iraq is probably the best-known conflict on the globe. But despite the global spotlight, Iraq may also be its least well known humanitarian crisis.

Too little attention has been devoted to the displacement tragedy looming in the shadows.

The exile of Iraqis is a long-running story. After 2003, the chance to end it prompted more than 300,000 Iraqis to return home, mainly from countries in the region. But the dramatic escalation of sectarian violence, in particular after the Samara bombing, reversed that homeward flow.

The scale of the problem speaks for itself. In the most significant displacement in the Middle East since the dramatic events of 1948, one in eight Iraqis have been driven from their homes. Some 1.9 million Iraqis are currently displaced inside the country and up to 2 million others have fled abroad.

The situation is dire too for non-Iraqi refugees inside the country. Palestinians in particular have been targeted amid the violence, with over 600 victims so far and over 15,000 unable to escape.

If this massive displacement has gone largely unnoticed, it is in part because most of those fleeing are not going to highly visible camps, but are being absorbed by host communities, in Iraq and in neighbouring States. It is the biggest urban caseload ever dealt with.

But those host communities are straining under this extraordinary burden, while the suffering of the displaced grows by the day.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The cost of this humanitarian tragedy, of course, has been borne chiefly by the Iraqis themselves.

Two neighbouring countries, the Syrian Arab Republic and Jordan, without any meaningful support from outside, have however provided most of the protection and humanitarian assistance, and I would like to pay tribute here to their generosity. More than 1 million and up to 750,000 Iraqis have sought safety in Syria and Jordan, respectively. The effect of these arrivals on their economy, society and infrastructure is overwhelming. It is time that the international community responded with genuine solidarity and unstinting aid to displaced Iraqis and to the States hosting them.

Other countries need to be commended. Refugees have also moved to Egypt, Lebanon, Iran and Turkey and, in varying numbers, to countries everywhere. In 2006, Iraqis

became the largest group of asylum-seekers in industrialized countries, a position they last occupied in 2002.

I had the opportunity to meet with Iraqi refugees in Syria and Jordan and saw their ordeal firsthand. They belong to all parts of society: rich and poor, elderly and children, hopeful professionals and struggling widows, families torn apart.

As UN High Commissioner for Refugees, I have asked States to grant protection to those who have sought refuge on their soil. I believe that Iraqis in general, if escaping conflict and insecurity, meet the definition of a refugee. But for me, more important than terminology – whether a State calls a person a refugee or not – is the tangible protection afforded that person. Countries in the region have welcomed Iraqis in the Arab and Muslim tradition of hospitality, granting safety in line with the concept of "Aman" clearly present in Islamic law since the Holy Qur'an.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is evident that permanent local integration of such large numbers of Iraqis in countries of asylum is not a solution. Resettlement to third countries is only an answer for the most vulnerable. Obviously, the best solution for the overwhelming majority of Iraqi refugees will be their voluntary return in safety and dignity – once conditions allow.

These are refugees who fled widespread violence, not a State policy of persecution. For that reason and in anticipation of their future return, it is essential that they maintain links with their country. There, nobody can replace the action and initiative of the Iraqi Government. I was very encouraged during my visit to Baghdad two weeks ago to see that authorities are both ready to support Iraqis abroad and to cooperate with the governments of host countries.

Inside Iraq, everything possible must be done to prevent further flight. We know only too well the devastating consequences of uncontrolled sectarianism. Efforts must be made now, rather than later, to prevent protracted displacement and an exile without end. Our goal must remain voluntary return in the context of national reconciliation.

UNHCR is scaling up its activities and positioning itself to better help the most vulnerable Iraqis in neighbouring States and within Iraq, including the deployment of an international presence in Baghdad. But our efforts and those of other humanitarian agencies are only a drop in the ocean.

UNHCR welcomes the establishment last week of the UN Strategic Framework for Humanitarian Action in Iraq. We will assume our full responsibilities for the internally displaced, together with our sister agencies and in close cooperation with the Government, in order to reach a larger at-risk population inside the country.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is a conference on a humanitarian problem and my agency has a strict rights-based mandate. We have no other agenda than the people – the people who suffer and need protection, assistance and a solution to their plight. But we all know that humanitarian problems are symptoms of a disease whose cure can only be political.

All relevant actors are essential to that political solution. We welcome the recent gathering of concerned States in Baghdad on 10 March. We look forward to similar initiatives and are committed to supporting the working group tasked with refugee issues and contributing to its success.

The dramatic needs of the Iraqis and the challenges faced by host countries require an urgent and meaningful expression of solidarity by the international community, so well represented here today, as well as effective action to share the humanitarian burden. That includes financial, economic and technical support, but also expanded resettlement opportunities for the most vulnerable. The generosity of host countries must be matched by that of the entire international community.

Keeping borders open, ensuring Iraqis seeking safety are not forced back into danger and are given access to protection and humane living conditions, reaffirming the importance of respect for fundamental human rights and humanitarian principles: these are responsibilities for all, not just the countries in the region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This conference is only a first step in what we hope will be a sustained dialogue and comprehensive, coordinated response to the humanitarian crisis in Iraq. We are ready to cooperate with all actors to ensure that protection space is preserved, the dignity of displaced Iraqis is enhanced, and the communities hosting them are effectively supported.

The humanitarian dimension of the problem can no longer be overlooked. Almost 4 million Iraqis are watching us today. Their needs are as obvious as the moral imperative to help. All of us – representatives of governments, international organizations and civil society – are now compelled to act.

Thank you.