

Summary of presentation by UN Assistant High Commissioner for Refugees, Mrs Erika Feller, at the launch of Forced Migration Review special Iraq issue

London, 19 June 2007

Distinguished guests, Chair and members of the panel,

I wish to thank the Refugee Studies Centre for inviting me to the launch of the latest special issue of the Forced Migration Review.

I would also like to congratulate the Refugee Studies Centre for putting together such a thorough and comprehensive issue which extensively analyses the multi-dimensional humanitarian situation and effectively exposes the "human face" behind the facts and the data.

The exile of Iraqis is a long running story. Over the past three decades, a large number of Iraqi nationals have left their country in successive waves owing to a variety of factors, including human rights violations, conflict, and the impact of economic sanctions. In 2002, the Iraqi expatriate community worldwide numbered some four million people, with more than half a million in neighbouring States.

After the events of March 2003, some had hoped that large numbers of Iraqi expatriates and refugees would return to Iraq and contribute to the reconstruction and development of their country. Between 2003 and 2005, some 325,000 Iraqi refugees did indeed return to their homeland. Since 2005, however, the trend has reversed and the returns have actually stopped. The spiralling sectarian, political and criminal violence, dwindling basic services, loss of livelihoods, and uncertainty about the future have spurred the flight of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, and created the biggest urban refugee caseload UNHCR has ever had to deal with.

UNHCR convened an international conference in Geneva from the 17th to the 18th of April to address the humanitarian needs of refugees and internally displaced persons inside Iraq and in neighbouring countries. As the editors of the Forced Migration Review special issue point out in the covering note, the High Commissioner was strongly of the view that, while Iraq is the world's best known conflict, it is the least well-known humanitarian crisis.

The conference was held in an effort to rectify this, to draw attention to the scale and complexity of, and indeed the urgency of meeting, the humanitarian needs of the some two million internally displaced inside Iraq and the 2.2 million refugees abroad. Apart from sensitisation, it was also intended- and we feel we have achieved this objective- to arouse concern and to have that concern translated into commitments from all involved, including Iraq, the host and resettlement states and the UN system.

Overall, we were pleased with the outcome of the conference.

More than 100 nations were represented at the conference, as well as the UN, the Red Cross, Red Crescent and over 60 Non-Governmental Organisations.

The Iraqi Government committed itself to support Iraqis outside the country, not only with financial assistance but also through cooperation with host countries, chiefly Syria and Jordan, as well as Egypt and others, especially in the areas of education and health.

The conference was, however, only a first step.

The challenge that faces us now is the biggest displacement of people in the Middle East since the Palestinian refugee crisis in 1948. Iraq's national economy is in difficulty and its administration is struggling with an ongoing conflict, pervasive insecurity and factional ethno-religious violence.

Massive displacement is the tragic result of all of this. The statistics suggest that around 40,000 Iraqis leave their homes each month. Around 2,000 Iraqis are being displaced per day. The total number of internally displaced persons in Iraq, including those displaced under the former regime, now exceeds two million. These are staggering figures when one considers that Iraq is a nation of 26 million persons.

It is important not to forget that Iraq is not only a refugee producing country, but also a refugee-hosting country. It is home to over 43,000 refugees, the large majority of whom are Palestinians and, amongst others, Iranians, Turkish, Sudanese and Syrians. They find themselves in a particularly dire situation.

UNHCR's protection interventions are managed largely through a network of Legal Aid and Information Centres within Iraq. There are currently 18 centres staffed by lawyers and social workers, who advise and assist the displaced with legal matters such as documentation. Increasingly, however, they focus on facilitating access to life-saving assistance, including food and emergency shelter.

Access to legal documents is of overriding importance. There is a huge shortage of internationally recognised Iraqi passports or civilian identification documents. Documentation is nonetheless the key to access social and welfare services, food rations, health care and accommodation.

In regards to the refugees outside the borders of Iraq, UNHCR's activities principally focus on keeping the borders open for new arrivals and preventing refoulement to Iraq. The protection space is very fragile at the moment, and the burden on neighbouring States has severely strained the available, but limited resources.

To date, the international response, including that of the Government of Iraq, to the needs of Jordan and Syria, particularly as regards the provision of basic health and education, has been disappointing. As a consequence, Jordan has largely restricted access to its borders. And whilst Syria has maintained its borders open, the burdens it bears are similarly imposing.

European governments, with some exceptions, have been reluctant to recognise the refugee status of Iraqi arrivals and to allow them to stay in reasonable conditions of certainty and sustainability. Recognition rates show great variance between EU member states, with some countries rejecting all Iraqi applicants. In others, assistance for 'failed' asylum seekers is made contingent on signing an application for voluntary return.

UNHCR continues to call on the European Union, and others further afield, to receive Iraqis, allow them to stay in proper and decent conditions for as long as is warranted, and certainly until return, when an option, becomes a genuinely sustainable one. We have offered return guidance to host governments and strongly recommend that it receive sympathetic consideration.

I would like to end by reiterating that there is a humanitarian crisis in Iraq, beyond the death toll of the daily bombings and killings. The immediate needs of over five million people call for assistance even as investment in recovery and rehabilitation strengthens. There has to be a more multi-dimensional understanding of the situation and its needs, and a more multi-faceted approach to international solidarity. Just as assistance is required at home, it is also needed to help the host countries in the region. This balance is still to be struck.

(BO London)