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Iraq: New humanitarian crisis looms as more than three million Iraqis displaced by war

Amnesty International today warned that the Middle East is on the verge of a new humanitarian crisis unless the European Union, US and other states take urgent and concrete measures to assist the more than three million people forcibly displaced by the conflict in Iraq.

In a briefing released in advance of an international conference being convened by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Geneva, 17-18 April 2007, the organization called for other states to immediately help alleviate the situation of Iraqi refugees who have increasingly flooded into Syria and Jordan, particularly since the February 2006 attack by armed insurgents on one of Iraq's holiest shrines, the Samarra' mosque. That attack sparked a new, more intensive bout of sectarian bloodletting in which civilians from across Iraq's increasingly divided communities have been among the principal targets.

"Syria and Jordan, who together now host some two million Iraqis, have borne the brunt of the refugee exodus so far, but there must be a limit to which they can continue to do so in the face of the continuing surge by Iraqis desperate to escape the conflict," said Malcolm Smart, Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North African Programme. "It is vital that other governments now step in and deliver -- not just pledge -- direct assistance in order to ensure that the refugees are adequately housed and fed, and have access to health care and education, in Syria, Jordan and the other countries which are now helping bear the consequences of the disaster in Iraq."

As well as direct aid to the Iraqi refugee communities and the countries hosting them, Amnesty International is calling on the US, EU and other states to establish generous resettlement programmes in order to assist Iraqi refugees, especially the most vulnerable and at risk, to start new lives well away from the conflict zone, and to afford all refugees and rejected asylum seekers effective protection. "The UK government and others which persist in returning failed asylum seekers to Iraq, arguing that the Kurdish north is relatively peaceful, should desist from this practice forthwith," said Malcolm Smart. "Iraqis' lives should not be put at risk in order for governments to demonstrate to a domestic audience that they can be tough on asylum seekers -- this is just playing with other people's lives."

Amnesty International is also calling for action to assist the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who have become internally displaced. "The Iraqi government, the states contributing troops to the Multinational Force, and other governments and political and religious leaders in the region must redouble their efforts

to find a political solution, one that brings an end to sectarian and other violence and allows Iraqis to return to their homes and live in peace," said Malcolm Smart. "Until and unless they do so, and find a solution which respects basic human rights, Iraqis will continue to pay the price with their lives and the stability of the entire region will remain under threat."

From 16 April a copy of the media briefing, *Iraq: A deepening refugee crisis,* will be available at: http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engmde140212007

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