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Humanitarian crisis in Iraq

John Holmes

Some eight million people need urgent protection and assistance.

One of the world's largest and fastest-growing humanitarian crises is also among the least known: Iraq. More than four million people, one out of every seven Iraqis, have fled their homes in what is the largest population displacement in the recent history of the Middle East.

The continuing violence not only causes so many civilian deaths (up to 100 every day), but also severely restricts movement, including that of aid workers, limits access to public services, and means continuing deterioration in living conditions.

Clean water, sanitation, health services, food, and electricity are increasingly in short supply.

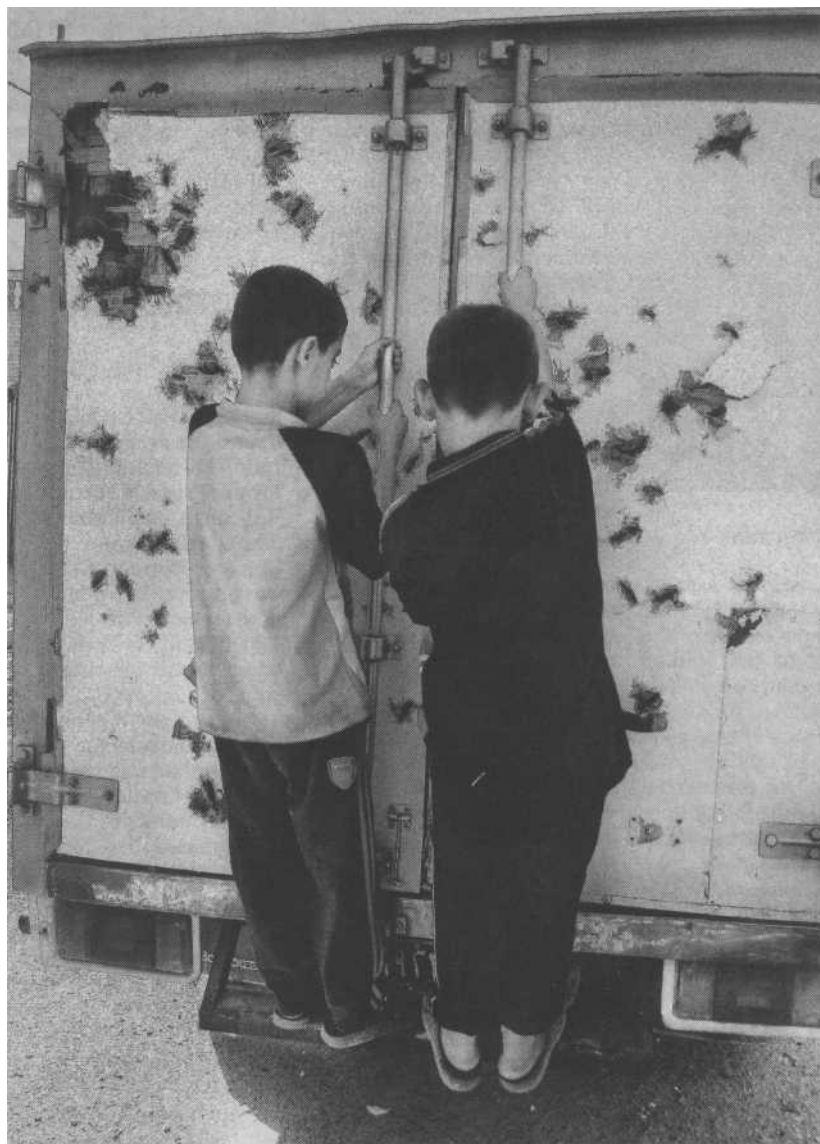
All this means that some eight million Iraqis are now in need of humanitarian assistance and protection, including more than two million Iraqi refugees living outside the country's borders and 2.2 million displaced within them. The vast majority are women and children.

The Iraqis who have fled to neighbouring Jordan and Syria, and to a lesser extent, Egypt, Iran, and Lebanon, lead a precarious existence. They are struggling for jobs, schooling, healthcare — and most of all, hope.

Tough for neighbours

Iraq's neighbours therefore have to shoulder a heavy responsibility. Inevitably, the welcome mat may be wearing a little thin among already over-burdened host communities. Jordan, for example, with only six million people, has taken in 750,000 Iraqis, and per capita now hosts the largest refugee population in the world. Imagine if the United States suddenly had to cope with 37.5 million refugees.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, other U.N. agencies, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are working hard, with the host governments, to help ease the strain. A high-level conference in Geneva in April helped raise awareness, and led to an initial fundraising effort of \$60 million, subsequently increased to \$120 million. They and other U.N. agencies are also asking for a further \$130 million to reinforce education facilities to cope with the huge influx of Iraqi children — the basic idea is not to create separate camps



Iraqi children, the worst hit by the violence, hitch a ride on a bullet-riddled vehicle in Baghdad on Sunday. - PHOTO: AFP

or institutions for the Iraqis but to enable them to use what exists on a non-discriminatory basis.

None of this is straightforward. The political sensitivities are obvious. But helping those still in Iraq is even more difficult, for obvious reasons of security. The U.N., along with international and national NGOs, has quietly continued to

help, for example, with vaccination campaigns and emergency stocks of water, food, and other supplies to some of Iraq's most vulnerable communities. But these efforts are becoming only a drop in the swelling sea of need. So what is to be done, on the realistic assumption that the violence and disruption are not likely to end in the near future?

The short answer is that we need to gear up our humanitarian efforts rapidly. Of course, the Iraqi Government has both responsibilities and significant resources. It has for example offered \$25 million to help the refugees, and should do more. However, it cannot cope with the rapidly escalating problems alone. That is why we are putting together a new and urgent operational plan, with the key U.N. agencies and NGOs, which will be accompanied by a new appeal for further resources to help inside Iraq.

Dangerous place

There is no room to promise miracles. The country's current violence makes Iraq the most dangerous humanitarian arena in the world. Since 2003, 84 aid workers have been killed in Iraq, and numerous others have been injured or kidnapped. Those engaged in humanitarian work, primarily Iraqis, are literally risking their own lives to save others.

We want to increase their number, but can only do so with great prudence. We cannot forget that four years ago this month [August], one of my predecessors, along with 21 other colleagues, was killed by a truck bomb explosion at the U.N.'s Baghdad headquarters.

Despite the dangers, the humanitarian community must and will do more. At the same time, we will insist that our activities are separate from — and seen as separate from — any political, security or economic agenda. As humanitarians, we have only one objective: to provide aid to the suffering in a neutral, impartial manner based on need, not creed. These values are rooted in the ethical teachings of Islam and all major religions. I therefore call on all concerned — government and local authorities, armed forces, armed militias, political and religious groups — to do everything they can to promote and safeguard humanitarian assistance.

Humanitarian workers can only apply plasters on wounds. And clearly, the wound that is Iraq will continue to fester until there are political solutions to the conflicts. Meanwhile, we must continue to apply the plasters with care, compassion, and courage. — **Courtesy: U.N. Information Centre, New Delhi.**

(John Holmes is the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator.)