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Human rights situation in Iraq remains fragile – UN report



Police stand ready for a demonstration in June 2011 in Erbil, located in Iraq's Kurdistan region. Photo: Bikem Ekberzade/UNAMI PIO

“ *This is what the UN represents. In the idea and in the act. A courageous report in Lebanon; a groundbreaking referendum in Sudan; an essential transfer of power in Côte d'Ivoire; indispensable support to reconstruction after disaster in Haiti; ongoing engagement after decades of wars and devastation with the people of Iraq,*

Mr. Ad Melkert,
the Special Representative
of the UN Secretary-General for Iraq

”

The 2010 Report on the situation of Human Rights in Iraq, released on 8 August 2011 by UNAMI and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, warns that armed violence and “silent” human rights violations continue to affect large sectors of the population.

“Widespread poverty, economic stagnation, lack of opportunities, environmental degradation and an absence of basic services constitute ‘silent’ human rights violations that affect large sectors of the population,” the report notes.

The document studies a range of human rights issues, including the impact of armed conflict and violence on civilians, detention and the rule of law, and protection of the rights of specific groups. It also covers the state of political rights

in the country, including freedom of assembly and expression. It notes that while there was improvement in some areas, many challenges remain.

“Armed violence continued to impact negatively on civilian infrastructure,” according to the report, adding that such violence not only leads to arbitrary loss of life and injury, but also limits access to other basic rights, including the right to access basic humanitarian services, and the rights of assembly, freedom of expression and freedom of religion.

Significant problems remain with law enforcement and the administration of justice, especially in relation to the provision and respect for due process and fair trial rights. While the report noted some improvement in the physical conditions of many detention facilities and prisons,

incidents of abuse and torture remain widely reported. An over-reliance on confessions to convict encourages an environment where the torture of detainees takes place, the report notes.

“Perpetrators of crimes committed over many years continue to be unaccountable. A number of mass graves were discovered during the year containing the victims of various human rights abuses committed at various times over the past few decades,” the report states, while noting that women’s rights

in some ways deteriorated in 2010 and children continue to suffer from violence and armed conflict, in some instances having been recruited or used to commit acts of violence.

“The human rights situation throughout Iraq remains fragile,” the report notes while making a number of recommendations to address the enormous challenges that the Government and people of Iraq are facing.

Information for the report was gathered from direct monitoring by UNAMI, as

well as from a variety of other sources, including Government, UN Agencies, civil society and non-governmental organizations.

UNAMI’s Human Rights Office works with the Government, as well as members of Iraqi civil society, to support the promotion, respect and protection of human rights in an impartial manner. The Office also works closely with other UN funds, agencies and programmes to ensure that the basic rights of all Iraqis are fundamental to their activities.

Civil Society

European Union and UNDP train journalists and judicial spokespeople in court reporting

By Shabaz Jamal and Birgitte Bellsund, UNDP -Iraq



Iraqi journalists work on a court reporting exercise in June 2011. Photo: UNDP- Iraq

Fair and accurate media reporting is important in any country, especially in conflict-affected countries like Iraq. The way information is presented by the media shapes the opinions held by the public and can either promote reconciliation or inflame divisions between groups.

When journalists report on court cases, it is even more

important that they do so in a fair and accurate manner. Proper reporting of court cases is in the public interest as it helps maintain transparency and confidence in the courts and judiciary system in the country. However, reporting confidential case information could jeopardize a criminal investigation, affect the defendant’s right to a fair trial or unnecessarily expose

private family issues to the general public. This could risk the safety of the journalist and court staff, as well as those people involved in the case. It can also expose the journalist to legal punishment.

To improve the reporting of court cases and to ensure a common understanding, journalists, the judiciary and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in Iraq held training courses in Baghdad, Basra and Erbil from 12 to 15 June 2011. Iraqi journalists and judicial media spokespeople were trained by media and legal experts on a range of issues, including the Iraqi justice system, how journalists can access the courts for official information, and how to distinguish between confidential and public information.

For many of the participants, the training was their first formal training on the topic. Abdul-Hamid Zebary of the Iraq News Agency said: “Before the course I didn’t know how to report in a way that does not cause defamation, insult or the disclosure of confidential information. I did not really know much about the legal consequences of inaccurate reporting of court cases either.”

Another participant, Mwaffaq Mohamed of the Aswat Al Iraq news agency said:

“In one of my reports I had disclosed confidential information regarding a case. Now, after having completed the training, I managed to review and edit the report again in a way to protect the confidential information, and the report was published without any problems.”

The training is part of the UNDP’s work to promote the rule of law and justice, which is implemented in partnership with the European Union.

UNHCR assists displaced widows in Kurdistan region

By UNHCR- Iraq staff



Displaced widows, visited by Ms. Bushra Halepota from UNHCR, take a sewing course in Khabat district, located in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Photo: UNHCR - Iraq

“Gender Research” is one of the national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) trained by the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) as part of an extensive programme aimed at empowering some 140 national NGOs across Iraq. The NGO is carrying out several activities for internally displaced persons, including for widows in Khabat district, in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, on behalf of UNHCR.

To help the widows become self-reliant, the UN refugee agency supports vocational training projects and has recently

organized a one-month sewing course so that the widows can support their families. Most of the women have three to four children and struggle every day to cover the costs of rent, education and health expenses of their families.

Speaking to the head of UNHCR's office in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, Ms. Bushra Halepota, displaced widows highlighted the many difficulties they face, including in accessing necessary documentation in their respective areas of origin. Such required papers would allow them to benefit from social welfare

assistance and other pensions and compensations. They said their children also face several schooling problems due to the lack of proper documentation, overcrowded class-rooms, limited access to Arabic speaking schools and expensive means of transportation.

UNHCR, through Gender Research, is also regularly in contact with displaced widows in Erbil. Most widows are from Baghdad or Mosul and have access to public health facilities where they receive treatment free of charge. They, however, expressed concern regarding their inability to buy expensive medicines, as they have no jobs, nor any other source of income.

In addition, due to the lack of security in the areas they fled, they are unable to transfer their Public Distribution System cards from their places of origin, which is a precondition for benefiting from the social welfare system in the Kurdistan Region. These cards allow every Iraqi to have access to monthly food rations, as well as other critical supplies.

UNHCR, together with the Kurdistan authorities, is committed, among other kinds of assistance, to facilitate the provision of legal assistance to help the displaced widows who can also directly approach the new office of the Directorate of Combating Violence against women in the Khabat district for assistance.

These efforts are part of UNHCR's continuous support to the Iraqi Government to address protection needs and end displacement for the country's more than 1.3 million IDPs, including 381,500 who are displaced in the north.

For more information, please contact Hélène Caux, UNHCR Iraq operation, caux@unhcr.org

Human Rights

Private companies need to honour obligations towards foreign labour in Iraq, says IOM

By Livia Styp-Rekowska, IOM -Iraq

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has provided humanitarian assistance to a group of 35 Ukrainian and Bulgarian workers left in desperate straits by their employer in Iraq. The workers are part of an original group of 217 migrants, including Nepalese, recruited in December 2010 to work

on a construction project inside the international zone in Baghdad.

The call comes as IOM staff carry out several visits a day to a construction site where the migrants are living in crowded, dark, dirty and unventilated conditions, bringing food, water and medical assistance.

The men, who had been promised salaries of US\$2,500 per month when hired, have so far only received a few hundred dollars despite having worked very long hours for months. When a sub-contractor absconded, work on the construction site stopped, leaving the migrants without money or clean water and little access to food.

Human Rights

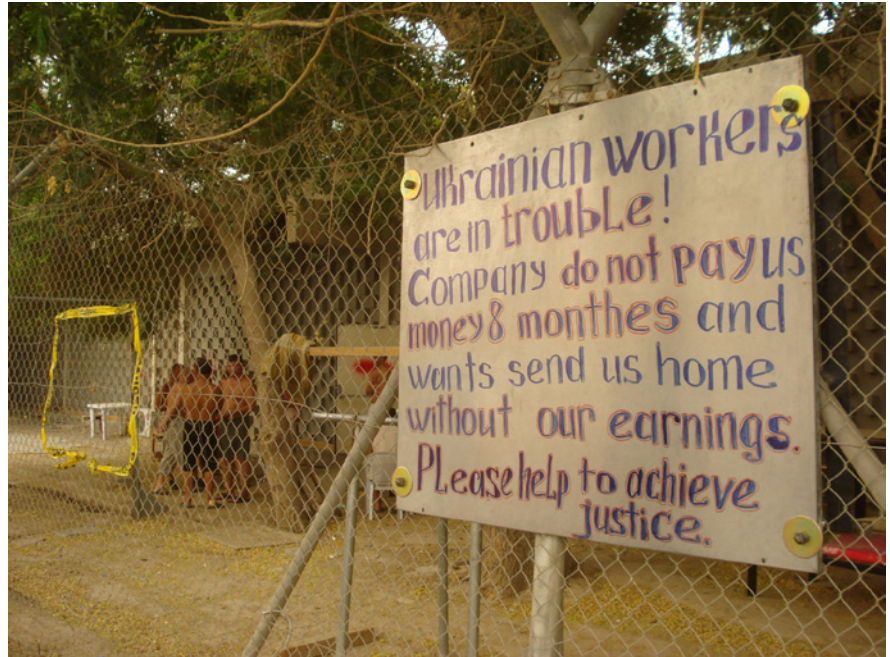
With their employer also having failed to get them the necessary residency permits as promised, the migrants automatically became undocumented workers.

The 35 migrants still at the site are living in unsanitary conditions and without electricity. Some have health problems related to poor food intake and drinking unsafe water. Having borrowed money to pay recruitment agents to get the job in Iraq in the first place, they are in debt which they are unlikely to pay off unless they are given their salaries.

IOM appeals to private companies to honour their obligations to take care of their workers and follow national immigration, labour and human rights norms.

"As an immediate step, their salaries need to be paid, for the employer to stop threatening them to leave the country without due remuneration and for the migrants to eventually be assisted home in a safe and dignified way," says Livia Styp-Rekowska, from IOM Baghdad.

Over the years, IOM has assisted many labour migrants who were exploited in Iraq to work in the construction, domestic and service industries, each with horrific stories to tell. "This is a very serious problem in the country. Many, if not most of the foreign workers in Iraq, are undocumented through no fault of their own, leaving them in an extremely vulnerable



The thirty-five migrants are still living at the site in unsanitary conditions. Photo: Livia Styp-Rekowska / IOM - Iraq

position," Styp-Rekowska adds. "We are talking of many tens of thousands of foreign workers. What is needed to stop this kind of exploitation is a comprehensive labour migration policy in Iraq and for the new counter-trafficking law to be passed by parliament combined with an effective system that protects trafficked or stranded migrants."

As a member of the UN Country Team

(UNCT) for Iraq, IOM Iraq works closely with the United Nations system and the Iraqi authorities in support of the Iraqi National Development Plan 2010 - 2014, and is integrated into all sector outcome teams of the UNCT Coordination Structure.

For more information, please contact Livia Styp-Rekowska, Capacity Building Officer: Istyprekowska@iom.int

Health



Iraqi stakeholders review the findings of the Health Information System assessment in March 2011 in Baghdad. Photo: WHO

WHO: Assessing a Health Information System in Iraq

By Ruba Hikmat, WHO- Iraq

Reliable and timely data is essential to delivering public health services. Over the past few years, Iraq invested significantly in a Health Information System (HIS) through the acquisition of hardware and software equipment and technical expertise. However, ad-hoc and fragmented efforts to revamp the various components of HIS have had little tangible effects especially on the quality information that could adequately support evidence-based health care planning and decision making. This drawback has been attributed, to a large extent, to lack of a clear HIS vision, policy and strategy.

Health

A new assessment conducted by the Ministry of Health with the full technical support of World Health Organization (WHO) revealed that the National HIS is weak and inefficient. The assessment process was carried out through a series of consultative workshops funded by UN Development Group – Iraq Trust Fund, led by a large group of Iraqi HIS stakeholders. This was a first step towards prioritizing investments and strengthening this system. It provides a roadmap towards the development of a national strategic plan.

The report calls for identifying the pressing needs and implementing the most

effective interventions to reform and strengthen the HIS and to prioritize and streamline the inflow of resources into the health care system.

In support of these efforts, WHO trained the members of the HIS Stakeholders Working Group on the use of an assessment tool that is based on the international WHO Health Metrics Network. The tool consists of a questionnaire with 197 questions divided into the six components: resources essential, health indicators, data sources, data management, information products and dissemination and use.

The assessment has identified a number of issues, problems and gaps in the existing HIS. Each will be scrutinized from various perspectives in order to produce quality information in a timely manner and ensure their adequate use by all relevant stakeholders. A consolidated strategic plan will also be developed providing a solid foundation for development of a responsive health information system that meets the needs and aspirations of the Iraqi people.

For more information, please contact Dr. Aqila Noori, Medical Officer, WHO-Iraq: nooria@irq.emro.who.int

Feature

Displaced Iraqis from varied backgrounds share common thread

By Bikem Ekberzade, UNAMI PIO



Refugee women and children, mainly Kurds from Iran, discuss the problems they face while taking refuge in Baharke, a village north of Erbil, located in Iraq's Kurdistan region. Photo: Bikem Ekberzade/UNAMI PIO

Hamza Mizir Muhammed and her family have lived in western Erbil for more than five years, having come in 2006 following escalating violence in Baghdad. Mizir and her two small children now spend their days at home, a basic cement structure. Inside, there is not much, blankets thrown on the floor to sit on while watching TV, mattresses folded and neatly stacked up

until nightfall. Mizir's Kurdish neighbour, Sabrije Ahmed and her children, are frequent guests.

With a constant stream of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Baghdad arriving over the past few years, the area has turned into an ethnically mixed neighbourhood. Arabs and Kurds living side-by-side, children playing together.

Nearby, Ahmed Fazil Nassar and his family of five share a house with his brother Saad Fazil and his family of seven. They too are Arabs from Baghdad who fled the capital in 2006.

Just as in Mizir's house, the television is on inside. Nothing is wrong with the picture, except that two of the children who are looking at the screen are hearing impaired. Ahmed tells the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) that his niece's hearing may come back if she could only get the necessary surgery.

One of the main obstacles IDP families face is the issuing or renewing of personal identification. Only government offices in their place of origin can provide these documents, but due to the security situation, families are reluctant to go back.

Most IDP families currently taking refuge in greater Erbil are those who fled escalating violence following the 2006 Samarra mosque bombing which triggered a wave of sectarian violence. According to UNHCR, a total of some 53,372 individuals took refuge in greater Erbil. A majority of these are Kurdish families from Mosul, followed by Arab families from the center and south, Christian families

Feature

from Baghdad, Mosul and Kirkuk, and the country's other minority groups.

While the violence after the Samara bombing displaced thousands within the country, along with those who took shelter here, the relative peace and quiet of Erbil also attracts tourists from around the country.

In the centre of the city is Shanidar Park, a fairy-tale place with cable cars, artificial waterfalls, and ice cream and popcorn vendors. Children run on its large lawns while families picnic. Most of the visitors are Arabs, mainly from Basra and Baghdad, coming to Erbil on holiday. To the

north of the city, is a bustling village, Baharke, which hosts several refugee and IDP families, mostly Kurds from Iran.

Once every week, the refugee and IDP women in the village gather under the roof of Seriyê Hanim. For this week's meeting, UNHCR's implementing partner, Public Aid Organization, a Kurdish non-governmental organization running the Protection Assistance Center in Erbil, brought two guests: a nurse and a Kurdish woman activist.

Cold beverages are served, the guests to this week's only women's meeting introduce themselves. The gathering pro-

vides an opportunity for the participants to talk about intimate issues, including gender based violence. The women open up with their health problems first to the Meliha, the nurse from Erbil, and later to the legal councilors. Soon the informal setting of the room loosens up.

In less than half an hour the women are moving around, sharing, listening, and talking about their problems. While their backgrounds might be different, they share a common thread in having to start from anew with the same challenges and concerns.

News Briefs

Secretary-General appoints Martin Kobler of Germany as next Special Representative for Iraq

UN Secretary-General BAN Ki-moon on 5 August appointed Mr. Martin Kobler of Germany as his Special Representative for Iraq. Mr. Kobler will replace Ad Melkert of the Netherlands who served in Iraq since July 2009. The Secretary-General stated he was grateful for Mr. Melkert's leadership of UNAMI in implementing its mandate under Security Council resolution 1770 (2007) and subsequent resolutions.

Mr. Kobler, who has served as Deputy Special Representative (Political) for Afghanistan since March 2010, brings to the position vast experience in developing policies for conflict areas with more than 25 years in his country's Foreign Service. He previously served as Director-General for Culture and Communication in Germany's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and was Ambassador to Iraq and Egypt.



Mr. Martin Kobler, the SRSR for Iraq. Photo: UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

UNAMI calls on Government to abide by international law in dealing with Ashraf Camp

Over the past few years the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq and the High Commissioner for Human Rights have been closely monitoring the situation in Camp Ashraf, exploring possible assistance in reaching a resolution consistent with Iraq's sovereignty rights and

international law.

UNAMI's mandate includes the promotion of human rights and the Mission regularly assesses the situation in and around the Camp. The UN continues to advocate that its residents be protected from forcible deportation, expulsion or repatriation contrary to the non-refoulement principle. The Mission will continue to assist the Government in search of a peaceful solution to the issues of the Camp in line with international humanitarian and human rights law and seeks the support of the international community in these efforts.

Civil Society in Karbala commemorate UN Headquarters bombing

Civil society representatives, local officials, academia and the UN staff in Karbala came together on 17 August 2011 to commemorate the 8th anniversary of the bombing of UN headquarters in Baghdad that killed 22 UN staff, including Mr. Sergio Vieira de Mello, the UN's top envoy in Iraq. The ceremony included speeches rejecting terrorism and praising the work of the UN in Iraq.

The event, entitled "Stand of Solidarity" was organized by the Civil Society Fo-



SRSO Ad Melkert and UNAMI staff commemorate the 8th anniversary of the attack on UN Headquarters in Baghdad, 19 August 2011. Photo: Chris Cycmanick/UNAMI PIO

rum, a network of Iraqi civil society organizations. "This is to send a message to the world that Iraqis will not forget those who stood by us, extending a helping hand. It is also a message (...) that Iraq is home to peace, love and accord. Acts of terrorism have nothing to do with Iraq's history, genuineness and generosity," the Forum said in a delivered statement.

UN top envoy in Iraq condemns terrorist attacks, urges Iraqis unite, remain steadfast

The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Iraq, Ad Melkert, strongly condemned a series of terrorist attacks in a number of cities across Iraq on 15

August. The acts claimed the lives of dozens of victims and wounded many more. He extended his condolences to the families of the victims, as well as the Government of Iraq. He deplored the deliberate targeting of security forces and locations where civilians congregate, including near places of worship especially during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. He also called upon all Iraqis to reflect on the values of tolerance and respect for human life, urging Iraq's people to unite and remain steadfast in their continued effort towards coexistence, democracy and reconstruction.

UNAMI publishes report on Iraqi Marshlands

On 24 August UNAMI published a report on the Iraqi Marshlands, titled "Managing Change in the Marshlands: Iraq's

Critical Challenge." The document, developed by the UN Integrated Water Task Force for Iraq under the coordination of the UN Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (UNESCO) and the Mission, emphasizes that the restoration of the Marshlands is a vital environmental and development priority.

It calls for development of a national vision for the management and governance of the Marshlands, and highlights the importance of adopting an integrated approach to water resource management in Iraq. The report concludes that the sustainable development of the Marshlands must recognize the need to balance trade-offs between development and the environment.

The report was prepared in close partnership with key Marshlands stakeholders, including the central and local government, civil society organizations, academic institutions and representatives of the Marshlands communities.

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 Editor-in-Chief: Radhia Achouri
 Managing Editor: Aicha Elbasri
 Editor: Christopher Cycmanick
 Photo Editor: Bikem Ekberzade
 Graphic Designer: Salar A. Brifkani

List of UN Acronyms

There are 16 UN organisations, programmes, agencies and funds working in Iraq. They are the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Labour Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM), UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), UN Development Programme (UNDP), UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), UN Population Fund (UNFPA), UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT), Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS), World Food Programme (WFP) and World Health Organization (WHO).