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UNHCR launches new appeal for Iraq operations

GENEVA - The UN refugee agency, UNHCR, today launched a \$60 million appeal to fund its work over the next 12 months for hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced people affected by the conflict in Iraq.

The funds will cover UNHCR's protection and assistance programmes for Iraqi refugees in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Turkey, as well as non-Iraqi refugees and internally displaced people within Iraq itself.

The new appeal concludes that unremitting violence in Iraq will likely mean continued mass internal and external displacement affecting much of the surrounding region. The appeal notes that the current exodus is the largest long-term population movement in the Middle East since the displacement of Palestinians following the creation of Israel in 1948. About one out of every eight Iraqis is now displaced.

"The longer this conflict goes on, the more difficult it becomes for the hundreds of thousands of people displaced and the communities that are trying to help them - both inside and outside Iraq," said UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres. "The burden on host communities and governments in the region is enormous. It is essential that the international community support humanitarian efforts to help the most vulnerable people."

UNHCR and its partners estimate that out of a total population of 26 million, some 1.7 million Iraqis are currently displaced internally and up to 2 million others have fled to nearby countries. While many of them were displaced before 2003, increasing numbers of Iraqis are now fleeing escalating sectarian, ethnic and generalised violence. In 2006 alone, UNHCR estimates that nearly 500,000 Iraqis fled to other areas inside the country and that 40,000 to 50,000 continue to flee their homes every month. UNHCR's planning figures under the latest appeal are for up to 2.3 million internally displaced people within Iraq by the end of 2007.

The UNHCR appeal notes that a significant proportion of both the internally and externally displaced Iraqis has run out of resources or will soon do so, leaving them and their host communities increasingly vulnerable. There are increasing reports of women forced to resort to prostitution, as well as growing child labour problems. The appeal includes programmes to identify and register the most vulnerable among the displaced so they can get the support they need.

UNHCR Regional Office
For the Baltic and Nordic
Countries

External
Affairs Unit
www.unhcr.dk

Tel (46 8) 457 48 80
Fax (46 8) 457 48 87
www.unhcr.se



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A main objective of the revised UNHCR programme will be ensuring effective protection and assistance for up to 200,000 of the most vulnerable Iraqis in nearby countries, nearly all of them in urban areas such as Amman and Damascus.

Estimates of Iraqis displaced in neighbouring states include from 500,000 to 1 million in Syria; up to 700,000 in Jordan; 20,000 to 80,000 in Egypt; and up to 40,000 in Lebanon. Turkey has an unknown number of Iraqis. Many of those in nearby countries also fled before 2003, but tens of thousands continue to flee monthly, particularly to Syria and Jordan.

Host governments are finding it increasingly difficult to cope with large numbers of displaced Iraqis and some are unable to provide basic services. In Syria, some 30 percent of Iraqi children are not attending school; 4 percent of all Iraqis are disabled; and over 10 percent of Iraqi families are headed by women.

The appeal notes that more international help is needed to ensure that neighbouring states already struggling to cope with large numbers of Iraqis will continue to keep their borders open to those in need of refuge.

While acknowledging the serious security situation facing humanitarian workers inside Iraq, the appeal also calls for the provision of targeted assistance to up to 250,000 of the most vulnerable of the internally displaced Iraqis and their host communities. Given the dangerous security environment in Iraq, much of this work would have to be carried out by a network of local organisations.

Another UNHCR goal in 2007 is to provide more help and solutions for non-Iraqi refugees inside the country, including some of the estimated 15,000 Palestinians, 16,000 Turks, 12,000 Iranians and hundreds of Syrians and Sudanese.

UNHCR will also reinforce its emergency stockpiles in the region to reach a capacity of up to 200,000 beneficiaries.

The funds for 2007 will be sought in three tranches over a 12-month period - starting with \$25.5 million for priority activities in Iraq and neighbouring states. The second and third tranches will be dependent on funding of the first. Reflecting a shift in focus of UNHCR's work, more than half of the 2007 appeal funds will be allocated to UNHCR programmes in neighbouring states - up from about 25 percent in 2006. UNHCR's 2006 Iraq programme budget totaled \$29 million.

For full details on the 2007 Supplementary Budget Appeal for the Iraq Situation, go to the UNHCR website at www.unhcr.org

For more information, please contact spokesperson Paal Aarsaether, UNHCR Regional Office for the Baltic and Nordic Countries, in Stockholm on tel. +46 8 457 48 86 or e-mail aarsaeth@unhcr.org.

After office hours and on weekends, UNHCR's Press and Information officer on duty in the Baltic and Nordic countries can be reached on mobile +46 70 899 0169.

