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**UNHCR calls for refugee status for Iraqis fleeing Southern and Central Iraq**

STOCKHOLM – The UN Refugee Agency on Tuesday reiterated its appeal to all countries to recognize as refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention Iraqi asylum seekers fleeing the generalized violence and massive, targeted violations of human rights in Central and Southern Iraq.

“Today’s overall security situation is marked by extreme violence in Central Iraq and significant instability in the south of the country. Sectarian tensions sharply increased after the Samarra bombing last February, leading to targeted killings of thousands of Iraqis and ongoing massive displacement,” Paal Aarsaether, spokesman for UNHCR’s regional office for the Baltic and Nordic countries, said.

In this type of displacement situation, the UN Refugee Agency periodically issues advisories to governments on its positions regarding the return of specific populations, as was recently done in connection to the protection needs of Iraqis outside Iraq.

The UN Refugee Agency notes that since its previous advisory in September 2005, the security situation in Iraq has deteriorated. Today, the overall situation can be characterized as one of generalized violence in which massive, targeted violations of human rights are prevalent.

In light of this dire security situation, UNHCR recommends to all governments that Iraqi asylum seekers from Southern and Central Iraq should be favorably considered as refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention.

If an Iraqi from Southern or Central Iraq is not recognized under Convention grounds, a complementary form of protection should be granted.

“No Iraqi from Southern or Central Iraq should be forcibly returned to Iraq until such time as there is substantial improvement in the security and human rights situation in the country,” Aarsaether said.

UNHCR also advises against returns to the three Northern Kurdish Governorates in Iraq of persons not originating from there and recommends that asylum claims of Iraqis originating from the north be assessed based on 1951 Refugee Convention criteria, taking into account the individual merits of the claim.

Yesterday, the UN Refugee Agency launched a USD 60 million appeal for the Iraqi situation in 2007, focusing on hundreds of thousands of the most vulnerable Iraqis displaced both internally and externally.

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The appeal covers Iraq itself and five other countries in the region - Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Turkey - that have received the largest number of Iraqis. Some are also fleeing beyond the region – including to Europe.

Of some 40 nationalities seeking asylum in European countries in the first half of 2006, Iraqis ranked first with more than 8,100 applications. Statistics received from 36 industrialized countries during the first six months of last year showed a 50-percent increase in Iraqi asylum claims over the same period in 2005.

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](mailto:aarsaeth@unhcr.org).

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