

Statement by Volker Türk, UNHCR's Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, on the occasion of the launch of the Iraq Humanitarian Response Plan

Brussels, 4 June 2015

The tragic plight of the people of Iraq persists unabated, as armed conflict, an endless cycle of violence, and human rights abuses affect millions of civilians. Nearly 3 million persons have been internally displaced over the last two years alone, joining the ranks of some 900,000 from earlier. In addition, more than 183,000 have crossed borders to become refugees in neighbouring countries and beyond.

In an all-out effort to alleviate human suffering, we are launching here today the Humanitarian Response Plan [HRP], which considers the needs of over 8 million highly vulnerable Iraqis, including internally displaced persons and the communities that host them. These are shocking numbers when one thinks of the individual stories behind each and every one and, collectively, as a measurement of the scale of human misery. Unfortunately, they are numbers which we expect to grow by the hundreds of thousands this year as the conflict continues, and whole communities are subjected to grave human rights violations, as recent events in Anbar and elsewhere so amply demonstrate.

Some Iraqis are unable to access areas of safety within the country. They are besieged or may be prohibited from entry to surrounding areas. Denied the possibility of flight, they find themselves trapped by the ever-shifting maze of frontlines, and in some places held virtually hostage by armed groups who seek to assert their control. Others have been displaced multiple times, repeatedly exposed to the danger of proximity to active conflict areas. They have often been confronted with extreme violence, including systematic sexual violence. Many live with the trauma of what they have already suffered, which is too often exacerbated in the context of displacement. They worry that their children may not be able to continue their education, may be recruited to fight, or could be injured by mines. Others have lost access to basic services, and they can only hope to find shelter and not be turned away. The longer they endure such hardships, the more that uncertainty clouds every aspect of their daily lives. At the same time, refugees have also *entered* Iraq. The Kurdish region of Iraq now hosts close to 250,000 Syrian refugees whose humanitarian and early recovery needs are addressed in the Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan [3RP] led by UNHCR and UNDP.

The people of Iraq and the national authorities have mobilised resources to respond to this displacement crisis, but its sheer scale continues to outstrip capacity to meet the needs. The diminishing resources for survival in such situations are often accompanied by an increasing loss of hope. These convulsions of displacement in Iraq, with their impact on host communities and the trapped civilian populations, are an alarming indicator of tectonic shifts that are playing out at different levels within the country and regionally. There are complex reasons and motives underlying the horrific forms of violence and abuse suffered by the people of Iraq, where internal displacement happens both by design and by default, and even displacement by default may eventually become one by design.

Caught up in a vicious cycle of cause and effect that generates more divisiveness and fragmentation, Iraqi civilians are desperately in need of the services that adequate funding to this HRP can bring. As the lead coordinator for Protection, Emergency Shelter and Non-Food Items, and Camp Coordination and Camp Management [CCCM], UNHCR stands shoulder-to-shoulder with all the humanitarian actors represented in the appeal before you today. Global outrage at the suffering of the Iraqi people needs to be met with global solidarity to support the funding of the services that can help mitigate some of the worst impacts of the conflict.

Looking beyond the current crisis and to future prospects, beyond the urgency of the humanitarian support so desperately needed today, fundamentally, it will be Iraqis themselves who will ultimately be the ones to decide on the state of their country and its future. It is clear that the issue of national identity is a fundamental question for Iraq. A number of countries that went through a violent past opted for integration and acceptance of diversity, and it was successful. So there is hope indeed.

Against this background, it is therefore not surprising that at the core of the HRP lies a comprehensive vision of protection that seeks to foster an integrated and peaceful future. The focus of the HRP on mitigating the humanitarian consequences of the conflict and providing life-saving and sustaining responses to protection needs is more vital than ever, particularly for individuals at risk on account of their age, gender, or other social status. We need to prevent children from being drawn into the conflict, through access to education, access to livelihoods for their families, and instilling a sense of possibility for their futures. We need to respond to the needs of survivors of sexual violence, who are targeted in order to demoralise and destroy their communities, by ensuring their reintegration and facilitating their support.

The more specific protection component of the HRP, focusing on strengthening the protection capacities of government institutions and building community-based protection mechanisms, is also essential to longer-term solutions. Investing in the humanitarian response, which is centred on protection and builds upon the capacities and resilience of affected communities, lays the groundwork for confidence-building, reconciliation, and a peaceful future in Iraq.

I saw the potential of such efforts whilst on a recent mission to Iraq, where I visited, for example, a community centre serving the local Kurdish host population, Syrian refugees, and internally displaced persons of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. They have voluntarily formed multi-ethnic committees to work on preventing and addressing sexual and gender-based violence, including early marriage, as well as promoting child protection and providing legal assistance for registration and documentation issues. This model of protection is truly anchored in the community and provides a strong demonstration of people-to-people solidarity. It reminds us that there are opportunities in a crisis, including in displacement, where individuals may find ways to support one another around their shared experiences. It was also evident during this mission that women and children are the future and can be important agents of change in Iraq. They have a critical role to play in future reconstruction processes. Projects promoting their leadership and empowerment, and ensuring their protection, are key to their full participation in shaping the future of the country.

In order for these initiatives to be effective, however, we must at the same time address the issues of access, impunity, and solutions. The particular security environment in Iraq has a massive impact on humanitarian access, notably in highly insecure areas, areas controlled by armed opposition groups, and active conflict zones. Moreover, disrespect for international humanitarian law and international human rights law is rampant amongst many of the parties to the conflict. This points to the importance of continued efforts to strengthen the justice system, enabling it to offer redress and to provide a mechanism for the Iraqi people to come to grips with the past and forge the cohesion and sense of national identity that binds together rather than divides.

Finally, finding solutions to displacement is also intrinsically linked to state-building, national identity, and a future vision for Iraq. Throughout the process, the protection needs of civilians affected by conflict, including the internally displaced, must therefore be kept front and centre of humanitarian action. It is imperative that we are able to sustain our efforts to ensure their protection, through funding of this appeal to support a stepped-up response. We must always be thinking ahead. We must recognise that successful return to their communities or full integration in new ones will enable Iraqis to rebuild their lives in safety and dignity. This will restore the hope and sense of belonging that are so essential to a more peaceful future in Iraq.