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## Violence forcing numbers to flee homes

IRIN



In a report released on Friday, the United Nation's refugee agency (UNHCR) said it was concerned over the increase in the number of displaced Iraqis and the deteriorating humanitarian conditions they live in.

"Displacement caused by continuing sectarian violence in Iraq has necessitated a reassessment of the agency's work and priorities throughout the region," said Ron Redmond, chief UNHCR spokesman.

UNHCR estimates that there are now more than 1.5 million people displaced in Iraq. Some have been displaced since the early 1990s as a result of the first Gulf War, but the figure also includes more than 365,000 people who have fled their homes and communities since a Shi'ite shrine in the northern town of Samarra was attacked in February this year.

"UNHCR's figures are higher than those presented by the Iraq government and it looks to be the real figure of Iraq today as they are closest to those acquired by local NGOs," said Fatah Ahmed, spokesman for local NGO Iraq Aid Association (IAA).

The Iraq government estimates that at least 50,000 Iraqis are leaving their homes monthly due to the increase in sectarian violence and because of the deteriorating security situation. NGOs are having difficulties in helping such families making worst their living conditions.

"The situation for those hundreds of thousands of Iraqis is what we call chaos. Children are getting sick and diseases have become common among them. The total [365,000] of internally displaced [since February] is exactly the same as the population of Fallujah [69km west of Baghdad], one of the main cities in Iraq," Ahmed said.

"Can you imagine the whole city displaced? Put them together and you will see the impact!"

Most recently displaced families are living in government buildings and schools or improvised shelters and or camps administered by the Iraqi Red Crescent Society (IRCS).

In addition to the 1.5 million internally displaced Iraqis, UNHCR estimates that there are some 1.6 million Iraqi refugees, with 500,000 having fled to Jordan and 450,000 to Syria. Some have been outside Iraq for a decade or more, but many have fled since the US-led invasion of 2003 and the agency is noting an increasing arrival rate in those countries.

"Thousands of Iraqis flee the country every month, especially to Syria and Jordan, preferring to live under deteriorating conditions than suffer with the continued bad security situation countrywide," said Ahmed. "At least 50,000 Iraqis leave the country monthly to Syria and Jordan."

Statistics received by UNHCR from 36 industrialised countries for the first six months of the year showed a 50 percent increase in Iraqi asylum claims over the same period a year ago.

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