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## IRAQI REFUGEES

This information was formulated as a result of a Catholic Sisters 10-day delegation to Lebanon and Syria in January, 2008. The delegation, sponsored by Catholic Relief Services, met with a broad cross section of people in both countries including: UNHCR Regional Representatives, Christian and Islamic leaders, Religious NGOs, civil NGOs, a member of the Syrian Parliament, Iraqi refugees and U.S. diplomatic personnel.<sup>1</sup>

### SITUATION

- There are more than 2 million Iraqi refugees in the Middle East, with the largest numbers in Syria (1.5 million people), Jordan (700,000 people) and Lebanon (50,000 people).
- Each country has had a unique response to the crisis and requires separate consideration when addressing the possible response in U.S. policy. A common denominator among all of the countries in the region is that none of the countries have signed the 1951 Convention Related to the Status of Refugees, because they are hosting large numbers of Palestinian refugees. This means that the governments do not formally recognize the UNHCR refugee registration process (though they informally accept the designation). Another common factor is that the host countries are severely taxed in their effort to respond to the refugee crisis. The countries are in great need of economic assistance and increased capacity to relocate the refugees to third countries. Snapshots of two country situations are as follows:
  - **Syria** welcomed the refugees as guests until October 2007, when Syrian domestic pressures (including escalating cost of housing in Damascus, school over-crowding, and concern about the Syrian poor) caused the government to begin requiring the refugees to have a visa prior to entering Syria. This visa can be obtained either in Baghdad or at the border. Syria has not had a history of working with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and is beginning the process of having the Red Crescent (a quasi-governmental organization in Syria) contract with international NGOs for assistance to the Iraqi Refugees. From 2003 to the present, the Syrian people have been personally welcoming and have responded individually to the needs of the Iraqi refugees by opening their homes and sharing needed resources. An additional complexity in Syria is that Palestinian refugees who lived in Iraq are barred from entering. They have set up a moderate-sized camp inside Iraq at the Syrian border and are living in dire conditions.
  - **Lebanon** has had a closed border policy for refugees. Until the end of January, 2008, any refugee detained by Security would be charged with entering the country illegally and sentenced usually for one month (the minimum sentence). They were then transferred to the detention facility in Beirut. At the end of January, Caritas Lebanon Migrant Center (CLMC) and the Lebanese government worked out an

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<sup>1</sup> The opinions and positions stated are those of NETWORK, A Catholic Social Justice Lobby and, while not formally adopted by the entire delegation or Catholic Relief Services, reflect the experience of the delegation.

accord allowing Iraqi refugees to be paroled into the country if they pay \$630 per family for a six-month temporary visa. During the six months they can look for work and find a sponsor who will petition for them to become permanent residents in Lebanon. If they cannot find a sponsor they can renew their temporary residence permit with a new filing fee and application. This gives refugees a mechanism for regularizing their status in Lebanon. UNHCR and CRS/CLMC will share the costs for those Iraqis without the resources to pay.

### ADVOCACY POINTS

- **RESETTLEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES:** Encourage the US State Department to meet at least its target goal of resettling 12,000 refugees this year and consider the possibility of allocating more resources and personnel to expedite the processing of refugees especially in Department of Homeland Security that does the security interviews with Iraqi refugees.
- **MIGRATION AND REFUGEE ACCOUNT (MRA):** Support increased funding for the Migration Refugee Assistance (MRA) Account through FY09 appropriations and supplemental bills.
- **UNHCR FUNDING:** Encourage the US government to generously fund the UNHCR appeal of \$261 million for FY08 operations relating to Iraqi refugees in the region. The US has quickly offered to provide 1/3 of the requested UNHCR funding whenever there has been a request. However, the overall funding at times has gone unmet. The US should increase its contribution to this needed fund.
- **BILATERAL FUNDING FOR HOST COUNTRIES:** Support bilateral funding to the governments of Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt to ease the burden placed on host governments with large refugee populations. Seek mechanisms for and support to the refugees, NGOs and the UNHCR operating within Syria.
- **COMPLEX ISSUES TO BE RESOLVED:**
  - **NARROW THE APPLICATION OF SYRIAN SANCTIONS TO EXEMPT HUMANITARIAN NGOs FUNDED BY THE US:** International NGOs funded with State Department money to work with Iraqi refugees in Syria are limited by all of the Syrian sanctions. This is hampering their work and making it more costly for them to get the needed infrastructure. There needs to be a way to mitigate this reality.
  - **IRAQI-PALESTINIAN REFUGEES:** Because of the long history of Palestinian refugees in the region, those fleeing Iraq are caught in a no-person's land, not being welcomed in any country in the region. This needs to be addressed in some way that protects this vulnerable population.

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