

Iraq refugee crisis 'deepening,' US experts say

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WASHINGTON (AFP) — Squalid and dangerous conditions, lack of shelter and scarcity of food are threatening to worsen the living situation for those displaced by the war in Iraq, refugee experts said Tuesday.

Five years after the US-led invasion of Iraq, experts told a House of Representatives subcommittee hearing that serious problems persist for the 2.5 million people displaced inside Iraq and the two million who have fled to neighboring countries, according to UN figures.

Even though the number of new refugees has leveled off since the early years of the conflict, Ambassador Lawrence Foley said a prime concern is worsening poverty among those who sought shelter inside Iraq as well as in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Turkey.

"The most critical problem is increasing impoverishment," said Foley, senior coordinator for Iraqi refugee issues at the State Department.

Iraqis who live in foreign countries but do not possess residency permits are often forbidden to work, and so the longer they stay, the more likely they are to spend and deplete any remaining family resources, he said.

"Although refugee and IDP (internally displaced persons) populations have not grown significantly so far in 2008, we expect the needs of these existing populations to intensify with the passage of time," Foley said.

Gregory Gottlieb, deputy assistant administrator for USAID's bureau for democracy, conflict and humanitarian assistance, highlighted the problems faced by those Iraqis who have been displaced by sectarian violence inside Iraq.

"Despite a decrease in violence, slowing displacement rates, and limited returns in 2007, displacement within Iraq remains a serious humanitarian crisis," said Gottlieb.

"In short, Iraq's IDP and refugee crisis is deepening and will require a continued and targeted response from the US government and the international community as a whole," he said.

The bombing of a gold-domed Shiite mosque in Samarra in February 2006 caused 1.3 million Iraqis to flee their homes inside Iraq, and many of those families continue to face challenges in surviving day-to-day, he said.

In 2007, 60 percent of IDPs "reported not receiving any food assistance since becoming displaced," while 20 percent "reported seeking shelter in abandoned public buildings or other informal settlements with no clean water or electricity."

Gottlieb said that USAID has contributed more than 254 million dollars in humanitarian assistance to "vulnerable populations" in Iraq since 2003.

Democratic lawmaker Gary Ackerman, who chairs the House subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, recalled that Congress had increased from 500 to 5,000 last year the number of immigrant visas available to Iraqis, such as translators and drivers, who worked for US efforts in Iraq.

The Democratic-controlled Congress also "had to take the lead in providing an additional 150 million" dollars to address the problem, he said.

"So Congress has been very aggressive in dealing with this crisis. I wish I could say the same for the administration" of President George W. Bush, he said.

Ackerman accused the Bush administration of falling short of its goal of resettling 12,000 Iraqi refugees inside the United States in 2008, after having admitted 1,608 in fiscal year 2007 and 1,876 five months into fiscal year 2008.

However, Lori Scialabba, senior advisor on Iraq refugees to the Department of Homeland Security said immigration services was "committed to working with the Department of State and other program partners to meet the administration's goal."

Republican Congressman Dana Rohrabacher maintained that the United States should not be preoccupied with improving conditions for refugees, but focus instead on helping stabilize the Iraqi government.

"We need to do our best to ensure that the government of Iraq continues on a path of stability," he said. "We should be planning our withdrawal ... part of that withdrawal is not making refugees more comfortable in Jordan."

Rohrabacher said that on a recent visit to Iraq he met with a group of refugees who were "not interested in leaving the refugee camp because there was a subsidy situation going on. People have a hard time breaking dependency. We should not let that happen."

Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee countered that the United States has a responsibility to the Iraqi people.

"In a sense we have created a predicament despite the high goals we attempted to achieve," she said.