

ACTIVIST VETERAN TO SEEK HELP FOR DISPLACED IRAQIS

By James Lowe

August 13, 2008

NORTHAMPTON - Back from a weeklong trip to Jordan, Leeds resident Tyler Boudreau now hopes to enlist congressional help for Iraqi refugees there.

A former captain in the Marines who fought in Iraq in 2004 and 2005, Boudreau conceived the idea for the trip with another former military officer, Luis Montalvan, of Brooklyn, N.Y.

Their purpose, in Montalvan's words, was to gain a "wide and narrow view of the humanitarian crisis" sparked by the estimated 500,000 to 750,000 refugees entering Jordan since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.

"What's most compelling about this investigation we've done is there's total consensus," Boudreau said Tuesday. "Everyone agrees we should help the Iraqi people and the Iraqi refugees."

With their own take on the refugee situation, Boudreau and Montalvan now plan to draft a report and present it to U.S. Reps. John Olver, D-Amherst, and Richard Neal, D-Springfield, and Sens. Edward Kennedy and John Kerry, both D-Mass. They hope this, in turn, will lead to a congressional hearing on the issue. The Massachusetts legislators previously sent letters supporting the Jordan trip, Boudreau said.

An estimated 4.7 million Iraqis have been forced out of their homes because of violence since the American invasion. About 2 million people have fled Iraq altogether to neighboring countries like Jordan and Syria.

Boudreau and Montalvan formed the Iraq Veterans' Refugees Aid Association earlier this year to raise awareness about the refugee crisis.

The former soldiers traveled with photographer Paul Park and Agence France-Presse reporter Karin Zeitvogel. They were in Amman, Jordan's capital, Aug. 3 through Sunday. Boudreau writes about his experiences on his blog, deeperthanwars.blogspot.com.

Refugee brothers named Ali and Hamza served as their hosts and translators. Montalvan said he struck up a friendship with Ali after he volunteered as a translator for his Army unit in the early years of the war.

"He wanted to see Iraq prosper," Montalvan said. "At that time, people were optimistic."

But Ali later fled his home in Baghdad, Montalvan said, because his cooperation with American forces provoked death threats. Today he lives with his brother, father, sister and her children in a small apartment. Montalvan hopes the State Department will soon give Ali special immigrant status, allowing him and his extended family to resettle in the U.S.

Boudreau said the living conditions of other refugees he visited varied. One family, devastated by various medical problems, could only afford to live in a two-room apartment with no windows. Another had come to Amman with a fair amount of money saved, and were sending their children to private school.

But even for those relatively well off, Boudreau said, the future doesn't hold much in store. Refugees can't legally get jobs in Jordan.

"How would you feel if you had no future?" Boudreau asked. "How would you feel if you had no future for your kids?"

Though his mission is to advocate for the refugees, he said he feels conflicted about publicizing the often heart-rending stories they shared with him in confidence.

"You don't want to have to convince people," he said. "You don't want to have to sell it."

In addition to visiting displaced Iraqi individuals and families living in Amman, Boudreau and Montalvan also met with officials at the U.S. and Iraqi embassies there, the directors of the Jordanian ministries of the Interior and Foreign Affairs, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and some nongovernmental aid organizations.

They said all agreed that aid groups need more resources to lift refugees out of poverty and resettle them outside an overburdened Jordan. There was also consensus that returning the refugees to Iraq, given continuing violence and structural and economic devastation, is not an option, Boudreau said.

James F. Lowe can be reached at jlowe@gazettenet.com [2].

Daily Hampshire Gazette © 2008 All rights reserved

Source URL: <http://www.gazettenet.com/2008/08/13/activist-veteran-seek-help-displaced-iraqis>