

OFFERING RELIEF FOR IRAQ'S REFUGEES

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July 22, 2008

During our tours of duty in the Iraq war, our missions frequently demanded that we send Iraqi people away from their homes and their hometowns to protect them from the violence of coming battles which would almost certainly destroy their neighborhoods. Admittedly, though, as they packed what few belongings they could into their suitcases and trunks and drove (or often walked) off into the horizon, we gave little thought to where they might end up or how they might live once they got there. We are thinking about it now.

Nearly five million of the very Iraqi people we were sent to liberate have become displaced, over two million of whom live as refugees in neighboring countries. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), this represents the highest percentage of people seeking asylum worldwide. It appears that rather than rescue them from a desperate situation, we have merely altered the form of their predicament.

Today, for example, there are approximately 750,000 Iraq refugees living in Jordan. They are not permitted to work and so either live on dwindling savings or subject themselves to shameless exploitation, working for a fraction of an appropriate salary. Medical care is scarce and frequently cost-prohibitive. Housing is difficult to come by.

Only recently has Jordan allowed Iraqi children to attend schools, but the policy shift means little because there are simply not enough school seats or teachers available to handle the sudden influx of students. Furthermore, Iraqi children must often work to help their families stave off destitution, and young girls are frequently compelled into a life of prostitution.

With the highly unstable security situation lingering in Iraq, they cannot go home. With the dire conditions in Jordan and other countries hosting refugees, they cannot stay where they are for long. And with the fact in mind that 63 percent of Iraq refugees hold college degrees, making them invaluable to the reconstruction effort, we feel it is imperative to safeguard them while Iraq climbs back to her feet. The most substantial way that we, as a nation, can do that is to provide meaningful financial assistance.

In his recent New York Times op-ed piece, presidential candidate Barack Obama pledged \$2 billion to the refugee crisis. That's a good start, should he get elected, but sadly, that will not be enough. Jordan alone estimates it has spent that much already hosting Iraq refugees. Syria, which hosts over a million more refugees, has undoubtedly faced a similar bill.

The UNHCR warned in May that the money for refugees was running out quickly and that without assistance there would be no money left by August. High Commissioner Antonio Guterres said, "We will not be able to help hundreds of thousands of the most vulnerable Iraqi refugees and internally displaced if we do not receive funding for the remainder of 2008." He added, "Without this support, the humanitarian crisis we have faced over the past two years may grow even larger."

Meanwhile, the U.S. has provided only \$500 million to refugees over the past five years, roughly the equivalent to a single day's funding of the war in Iraq. While this remains the world's largest contribution (aside from the hosting nations themselves), we feel, as the precipitators of these refugees' plight, that it ought to be the largest and that it ought to be a lot more. In response to our country's inadequate efforts, we have formed the nonprofit organization "Iraq Veterans' Refugee Aid Association" (IVRAA).

In August, we will take on a new mission. The members of IVRAA will travel to Jordan in the accompaniment of a full press team to acquaint ourselves more intimately with the refugee situation there. Our primary goal is to raise public awareness and ultimately to influence our government to put forth the necessary aid for Iraq refugees. We hope that our identity as former military officers will draw a broader audience to this issue. We will be hosting a community discussion (with refreshments) this Thursday, July 24, at 7 p.m. in Lyman Hall, First Churches, 129 Main St. in Northampton. This will give us an opportunity to share the details of our project, hear suggestions, answer questions, and ask for small donations for our cause. All are invited to attend.

The United States pledged its support to the Iraqi people and sacrificed the lives and health of many service members to give it. We believe the honorable thing to do is to follow through on our word, and that means helping refugees. While it is true that the U.S. should grant asylum to a far greater number of applicants, resettlement is not the answer. The most significant help needed is aid - real aid - the kind of aid that only governments can provide. We would like to suggest that the U.S. government end the war in Iraq a couple of weeks early and use that money instead for the refugees it created.