

# **Iraqi innocent pay for misplaced US spending priorities**

07-Feb-2007

By Georgina Pike

*Published in Eureka Street, Vol.17 No.2*

When Prime Minister John Howard committed Australia to war in Iraq on 18 March 2003, we were told "it's not likely to take a long period of time". We were also told that war was necessary to disarm Iraq of its "weapons of mass destruction". No mention was made of the millions of ordinary Iraqis whose lives would be irrevocably altered by the actions of Australia and its coalition partners. No mention was made of the refugee. Almost four years later, Australia's military involvement in Iraq continues and no "weapons of mass destruction" have been found. And still, the needs of the rapidly growing numbers of Iraqi refugees are being forgotten.

According to the United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, the Iraq war has precipitated the largest long-term population movement in the Middle East since the displacement of the Palestinians in 1948. Of a total Iraqi population of 26 million, around 1.7 million Iraqis have been forced to move within their own country, while a similar number have fled to nearby countries.

The refugee crisis is the untold human story of the war in Iraq.

The flow of people out of and within Iraq has been unpredictable, making contingency plans difficult to implement. Predictions of a mass refugee exodus immediately after the March 2003 invasion proved to be initially unfounded. In fact, 300 000 Iraqis returned to their homeland between 2003 and 2006.

However, that trend shifted dramatically after a Shiite shrine in Samarra was bombed in February of 2006, igniting widespread killings between religious factions. According to the UNHCR, the escalating sectarian violence is forcing 50 000 people per month to leave their homes, and they predict the number of internally displaced people - those forced to leave their homes but not the country - could reach 2.7 million by the end of the year.

In this climate of religious hostility, Iraqi Christian minorities are particularly vulnerable. According to UNHCR, 40 percent of Iraqi refugees are Christian, though they make up only 4 percent of the nation's total population.

President George W Bush has committed to send an additional 21 500 troops, signalling that US (and Australian) presence there is not about to end soon. The question must then be asked, what is being done to house, feed and clothe the millions of refugees created as a direct result of our military intervention? The answer, thus far, has been precious little.

The burden of providing protection to the Iraqi refugees is being borne, overwhelmingly, by Middle Eastern nations. Syria alone is host to 1 million refugees while Jordan is hosting 700 000. This generosity is being stretched to its limits. Jordan has recently closed its borders to Iraqi men between the ages of 18 and 35. After a series of bomb attacks in November 2005 in the capital, Amman, authorities have moved to tighten

security measures by limiting the number of residency permits granted to Iraqis, by detaining Iraqis residing illegally in Jordan and by turning away Iraqis without proper documentation at the border. These measures have made Jordan into a less safe and secure destination for Iraqi refugees.

Most worrying is that, there are strong indications both Jordan and Syria are frequently violating the most fundamental principle of refugee protection – *nonrefoulement*, which prohibits the return of refugees to persecution or serious harm. It is becoming clear that protection of Iraqi refugees in their country of first asylum is growing more precarious by the day.

Of the 700 000 refugees currently subsisting in Jordan, some 21,000 Iraqis have registered with UNHCR, but only 800 have been given refugee status and can be considered for resettlement. This extremely low rate of refugee status recognition means that only a tiny proportion of Iraqi refugees can gain genuine protection in countries of first asylum like Jordan.

With the humanitarian crisis only escalating, the response of countries better able to lend assistance – countries that bear a greater moral responsibility to lend assistance due to their involvement in the war – has been belated and inadequate. While Australia has resettled a modest number of refugees – 2 425 Iraqis settled in Australia during 2005-2006 – the response from the United States to the humanitarian needs in part created by their military actions, has been almost non-existent. A mere 466 Iraqi refugees have been admitted to the United States since the war began almost four years ago. Clearly, political imperatives are overriding humanitarian needs, and it is innocent refugees who are suffering for it.

The needs of refugees are also being sacrificed due to misplaced funding priorities. As the only international refugee protection organisation, UNHCR has a mammoth task in ensuring that refugees have access to basic means of survival. However, the organisation is chronically under funded. An appeal is currently underway for US\$60 million to enable the UNHCR to confront the Iraqi refugee crisis this year. While numerous NGOs compete for a section of the small philanthropic pie, this may seem like an insignificant sum. However, it must be contrasted to the US\$2 billion spent *every week* by the United States on their military operations in Iraq. It then seems a very small price to pay to begin the work of undoing the damage done by war on innocent men, women and children.

Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom have demonstrated their ability and willingness to coordinate a military response – it is now time to cooperate for humanitarian, rather than military, ends and address the crisis for which we bear the weight of responsibility.