

March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008

Dear President Bush, Prime Minister Brown, and Prime Minister Al-Maliki,

On the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of allied action in Iraq, we write to express our deep concern that so little has been done by your governments to address the desperate plight of Iraqis who have been forced to flee their homes as a result of the on-going conflict.

The movement of refugees is on a scale not seen in the Middle East since 1948, and although more international attention has focused on the issue in the last 12 months, far too little has been done to tackle the displacement crisis.

Iraqi refugees are a traumatized population. Conflict, violence and persecution has driven many from their homes and many have witnessed the death of family and friends. What savings they had to support themselves are rapidly running out; the generosity of those providing temporary sanctuary is being stretched to breaking point; and the conditions in which people are surviving are deteriorating.

Many of the signatories to this letter have raised these issues with your governments before. We are disappointed, therefore, that we have had to come together to make another joint call for action on the part of your governments. The US, the UK, and the Iraqi governments should be doing much more to lead a rapid, comprehensive and robust international response, both from a humanitarian point of view and in the interests of long-term regional stability.

**1. Immediate, direct assistance to displaced Iraqis who are in humanitarian need within Iraq and throughout the region must be made a priority.** Currently, the UNHCR, NGOs, and host governments shouldering the responsibility of the refugee crisis are providing assistance without sufficient funds. The longer people are displaced, the more help from others they require. Lacking sufficient assistance, countries such as Syria and Jordan, have been at times forced into desperate measures, such as imposing visas and closing borders thereby shutting down the only avenues of escape from persecution.

A substantial increase in aid, both bilaterally and through international agencies, is essential to ensure not only that the immediate needs of refugees already outside Iraq are met and that their safety is assured, but also that Iraqis who may be forced to flee for their lives in the months ahead will also be able to seek asylum in neighboring countries.

**2. The US and UK governments must widen the scope of their resettlement programs to include many more Iraqi refugees.** For the most vulnerable Iraqis, resettlement beyond the region is the only option. Many Iraqis who fled to Syria, Jordan or Lebanon tell us they will never be able to return home as they have been targeted personally by active militias. Many others are in a very vulnerable situation in their country of first asylum and live in constant fear of deportation.

Thousands of Palestinians are stranded in the region between the Iraq and Syrian border with no place to go. The UNHCR has identified 13,000 Palestinian refugees inside Iraq, as well as thousands of refugees from Iran and Turkey, many of whom are in need of resettlement or humanitarian relocation. The UNHCR also submitted over 21,000 Iraqi refugees in need of resettlement to 16 resettlement countries in 2007 – the response from the international community so far has been woefully inadequate.

We acknowledge that programs of assistance and resettlement for Iraqis employed by the US and UK governments and their interests in Iraq are active and we are heartened that at least part of this particularly vulnerable group is recognized as needing long term protection through resettlement. But we remain extremely concerned that other vulnerable groups are not being helped in a meaningful way, such as those targeted for their religious or political opinions, or women at risk, who make up more than 20 percent of those the UNHCR is looking to get resettled. It is necessary for the US and UK governments to widen significantly the scope of their resettlement programs to include these most at-risk populations.

**3. Iraqi refugees must be afforded continued access to meaningful refugee protection systems, both in neighboring and non-neighboring states.** The return of thousands of refugees to Iraq in the absence of any long-term stability is of great concern. Many of those who have returned have done so under duress, as a result of being unable to survive in their country of refuge. This is true in countries in the region, but also in Western countries, which deny support to refused asylum seekers, forcing them into destitution. Faced with uncertainty about their future, living in constant fear of arrest and deportation, and without any other viable options, many are left with no choice but to return to Iraq. In other cases, Iraqis are being forcibly returned, sometimes in a brutal and insensitive fashion, through expulsions and deportations.

Upon return to Iraq, many refugees undergo a secondary displacement inside the country because their houses are occupied, adding to the instability within Iraq. Your governments must work together to do the critical planning and preparation for the formidable logistical, humanitarian and legal challenges that need to take place before returns to Iraq are sustainable, including the claims of returnees for restitution or compensation for their homes and property. Until it is demonstrably safe and sustainable to do so, neither the UK nor US governments should be returning Iraqi refugees or asylum seekers to Iraq. Iraqis who have fled should be able to remain in their countries of refuge and be allowed to support themselves, or be given support, so that they can live decently, free from fear. We therefore welcome the recent decision of the Lebanese Government to recognize officially thousands of Iraqi refugees, who had previously been considered illegal immigrants liable to detention.

The 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Iraq conflict offers an opportunity for the US, UK and Iraqi governments to take much greater action to help the displaced Iraqis. We urge you to undertake immediate and meaningful action to bolster the protection of millions of displaced Iraqis inside Iraq, in the Middle East, and beyond. We urge your governments to take the lead in the international community in responding to this crisis.

Sincerely,

US signatories:

Adrian Dominican Sisters  
American Friends Service Committee  
Amnesty International US  
Chaldean Federation of America  
Episcopal Church  
International Rescue Committee  
Human Rights First  
Human Rights Watch  
Kurdish Human Rights Watch  
Mandaean Associations Union

Maryknoll Global Concerns  
Mennonite Central Committee  
Refugees International  
Southeast Asia Resource Action Center  
US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants  
Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children

UK signatories:

Refugee Council  
Amnesty International UK  
Human Rights Watch UK  
International Rescue Committee  
Refugee Action  
Welsh Refugee Council  
Council for Assisting Refugee Academics  
Scottish Refugee Council