International conference offers no solution to Iraqi refugee crisis

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An international conference held on July 26 in Jordan to address the refugee crisis produced by the US occupation of Iraq exemplified the callous indifference of the Bush administration and its allies toward the catastrophe they have created.

More than four million Iraqis have been displaced externally and internally, yet the invading powers have accepted a handful of refugees and provided a pittance in aid. Even as Iraq sinks further into disaster, the final conference statement vacuously declared: "The real and effective solution to the problem... is their return to their country."

The invasion of Iraq has led to the largest displacement of people in the Middle East since World War II, dwarfing the expulsion of more than 700,000 Palestinians from their homeland by Zionist terror during 1948. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that over 2.35 million people have fled Iraq for Syria, Jordan and other neighbouring states. The exodus is increasing at the rate of 50,000 each month.

A further 1.9 million people are classified as internally displaced persons (IDPs)—people who have escaped particularly violent regions of Iraq and taken refuge with relatives elsewhere or in shanty towns on the outskirts of safer areas. The displaced figure is growing by more than 80,000 per month. The UN predicts there will be 2.7 million IDPs by December 2007.

The combined total of refugees and IDPs already constitutes more than 15 percent of Iraq's pre-war population of 26 million. Syria and Jordan, which once had largely open borders with Iraq, have borne the brunt of the refugee disaster. Some 1.4 million Iraqis are believed to be sheltering in Syria and 750,000 in Jordan. A further 200,000 have taken refuge in the Gulf states, 100,000 in Egypt, over 50,000 in Iran, some 40,000 in Lebanon, and 10,000 in Turkey. The United States, by contrast, has accepted barely 700 Iraqi refugees over the past four-and-a-half years and just 133 in the past nine months as the crisis has become acute.

For the vast majority of refugees and IDPs, returning home is not an option. The areas they fled are either scenes of ongoing fighting between the American military and Iraqi resistance organisations or battlegrounds in the civil war that the US invasion ignited between rival Sunni and Shiite factions of the Iraqi ruling elite. Hundreds of thousands of people have been forced from their homes since the bombing of a revered Shiite mosque in Samarra on February 22, 2006, as sectarian extremists of both sides "cleanse" suburbs and entire cities.

Proportionally, the worst affected have been members of Iraq's non-Islamic minorities—Christians, Mandaeans, Yazidis and Baha'is—whom Sunni and Shiite fanatics treat as infidels and enemies. Iraq's Christian community has shrunk from an estimated 800,000 in 2001 to just 300,000 today due to sectarian persecution. Between 30 and 50 percent of the refugees are believed to be non-Muslims.

Moreover, even if the violence did abate, there is nothing to go back to for most of the refugees. Many of their loved ones are among the more than 700,000 Iraqis who have been killed under US occupation. Some have lost their homes and all their possessions. The country as a whole is in economic ruin. Its infrastructure is devastated and unemployment is estimated at between 60 and 70 percent.

The Iraqi Red Crescent Society (IRCS) issued a report on July 5 detailing the desperate conditions of IDPs within Iraq. Some 142,000 families—more than one million people—have been displaced since the Samarra bombing. "Pregnant women, infants and children are unable to get the required medical care and illegal abortions have become the norm," the IRCS explained. Many displaced youth are not attending school and turning to crime. "Rape, armed gangs, theft and drug addiction was common among IDPs," it stated. Other youth, whose families have been devastated by violence, are joining sectarian militias, "as they represent the true authority of the land for them".

A UNHCR report issued on July 12 summarised the plight of Iraq's external refugees: "UNHCR registration data and surveys indicate that at least 10 percent of displaced Iraqi

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families are female-headed, with over 30 percent of the total population having special needs. Large numbers of Iraqi refugees are poor and live in low-income areas in Damascus, Amman, Beirut and Cairo. There are reports of women and young girls forced to resort to prostitution or survival sex and of children working or being involved in other forms of exploitation in order to survive.

"Thousands of Iraqis approaching UNHCR are the victims of torture, sexual and gender-based violence, car bombings, or other violent attacks and are in urgent need of medical care. The majority of Iraqi children are not attending school—in fact, throughout the region, only 60,000 displaced Iraqi children are attending school. In a recent report, Save the Children put at 62 percent the proportion of children without access to education in Jordan. In Syria, a recent UNHCR/IPSOS survey put the figure at 76 percent, despite the liberal policy of the Syrian government toward the enrolment of Iraqi children. Many of these children are reported to have been out of school for two to three years. The potential emergence of a generation of uneducated Iraqi youth is a serious concern.

"The same UNHCR/IPSOS survey identified that 34 percent of Iraqis in Syria had insufficient funds to last a month, and 80 percent depending on savings or charity." (See "UNHCR Iraq situation response").

It was in this atmosphere of alarm and urgency that delegates from Jordan, Syria, Egypt, the UN, the European Union, the Arab League and the Red Cross and Red Crescent, along with observers from Iran, Turkey, Russia, Japan, Britain and the US, gathered last Thursday.

Jordan and Syria appealed for substantial monetary aid—a call echoed by the UNHCR. Jordan's interior minister, Mukheimar Abu-Jamous, told the conference that Iraqi refugees were costing Jordan over $1 billion. He condemned the US and other major powers for having "relinquished their responsibility in shouldering the Iraqi refugee burden".

Over the past two years, Jordan has adopted an increasingly harsh stance as the refugee inflow has inflated the population by more than 10 percent, compounded unemployment and increased inflation by 400 percent. Amman has banned male Iraqis aged 20 to 40 from entering and threatened to close its border completely.

Syria indicated it would continue to provide sanctuary, but was experiencing tremendous economic and social dislocation. Inflation had soared and essential services were stretched to the limit. The Syrian ambassador declared that the international community "must be involved, especially the United States, because its policy led to the plight the Iraqis are currently in and it bears responsibility".

The major powers, the US in particular, were completely uninterested. No financial aid was offered beyond the pledges that were made in April to the grossly inadequate $123 million UN fund for relief operations this year—just over $30 per displaced Iraqi. Syria is due to receive $45 million, while Jordan will get $30 million. Just $28 million will be spent assisting IDPs inside Iraq. Of those miserly amounts, well over 25 percent will go into logistical and administrative costs.

In regard to Syria, the Bush administration and its European allies are undoubtedly hoping that the Iraqi refugee crisis will contribute to destabilising the government of President Bashar al-Assad. Washington views the regime as one of the main obstacles to establishing its dominance over the Middle East.

The attitude of the invading powers—the US, Britain and Australia—to the refugee crisis underscores the predatory and criminal motives behind the 2003 invasion. It was a war for control over oil resources and strategic territory, in which the lives and well-being of the Iraqi people counted for nothing.

The US has promised a pittance of just $17 million to the UN fund, even as its average military expenditure in Iraq exceeds $4 billion per month. Britain is contributing $3.3 million, compared to $14.7 billion on military operations since March 2003. The Australian government is providing $2.3 million for Iraqi refugees, as against its $1 billion military budget for Iraq last year.

The transformation of millions of Iraqis into homeless exiles is a war crime for which those who planned, propagandised and carried out the war are responsible. Reversing the catastrophe requires a massive program of compensation and economic aid funded by the invading powers and the corporations that have made huge profits from the war.

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