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Angelina Jolie pays third visit to Iraq, appeals for aid for the displaced

BAGHDAD – UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie returned to Iraq on Thursday to offer support to the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who remain displaced within their own country.

During her day-long visit to Baghdad, Jolie visited a makeshift settlement for internally displaced people in the Chikook suburb of north-west Baghdad where she met four families displaced from the district of Abu Ghraib, located to the west of Baghdad, and from the western suburbs of the capital.

Despite the difficulties in Iraq, Jolie said this was a moment of opportunity for Iraqis to rebuild their lives. “This is a moment where things seem to be improving on the ground, but Iraqis need a lot of support and help to rebuild their lives.”

The families that Jolie met complained that their children could not go to school and they could not afford to pay for medical treatment for various ailments. 43-year-old Ali* built his crude brick dwelling in Chikook after escaping from Abu Ghraib district with his 38-year-old wife and six children four years ago.

“The only help that we got was from UNHCR. They are the only people who knocked on our door. But look at this life, it’s very hard on us,” he said. “It takes a lot of strength for you to survive this life. I don’t know if I would be strong enough to survive this,” Jolie told him.

In a nearby house, the acclaimed actress met a family of nine, including children who don’t go to school and a baby with a rash all over its body. Jolie rocked the new-born on her lap throughout the visit. A daughter-in-law studied law before the violence forced the family into flight and ended her education.

“No way,” the family said in unison when asked by Jolie if they wanted to return to their former home district. “Our neighbours returned and their three daughters were killed,” the daughter-in-law, Salwa,* said. “Why is this happening to us?,” she asked.

“They are right to feel that it is not fair,” said Jolie, who pledged to return to Iraq. “I want to come back and find you in a better place and in a different situation. We hope that UNHCR and the government will support you in getting a piece of land. You need help not because you are poor, but because you are the future of Iraq,” she stressed, adding that she hoped Salwa would be able to become a lawyer.

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"The picture in this camp is a rough one but there are also some people that were able to return home to other safer areas," Jolie said later. "There are some changes. There are returns of displaced people, not a big number but there is progress."

Chikook is home to more than 20,000 people, mostly women and children and including several thousand local people. It lacks drinking water, an operational sewage system and paved roads. The area is littered with garbage, despite a UNHCR-organized clean-up earlier this year.

The UN refugee agency has been trucking in potable water for the residents over the past few months, and has worked on the rehabilitation of the water system and conducted minor shelter repairs.

UNHCR estimates that 1.6 million Iraqis were internally displaced by a wave of sectarian warfare that erupted in February 2006 after the bombing of a mosque in the ancient city of Samarra. Almost 300,000 have returned to their homes amid a general improvement in the security situation since mid-2008.

Since April last year, UNHCR has provided emergency shelter rehabilitation and shelter upgrade to 5,000 families. Close to 20,000 homes will be rehabilitated by the end of this year. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees remain in neighbouring countries, mainly Syria and Jordan.

Jolie was making her third trip to Iraq. In August 2007, she visited 1,200 refugees trapped in Al Waleed camp near the border with Syria. She also visited the country in February last year, when she highlighted the problems faced by the internally displaced and urged action to help them.

* Names changed for protection reasons

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