

## Deputy High Commissioner on Iraq mission

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Briefing Notes, 21 July 2009

*This is a summary of what was said by UNHCR spokesperson Ron Redmond – to whom quoted text may be attributed – at the press briefing, on 21 July 2009, at the Palais des Nations in Geneva.*

Deputy High Commissioner L. Craig Johnstone is in Iraq today as part of a five-day mission to review UNHCR's operations for returnees, refugees and internally displaced people and for a series of meetings with Iraqi officials. He arrived in Baghdad Sunday evening and had a day of meetings with government officials yesterday (Monday). Today, Mr. Johnstone is scheduled to visit settlements for internally displaced Iraqis around Baghdad.

His meetings yesterday included talks with Iraqi Vice President Tarek Al-Hashimi; the Minister of Human Rights; and the Minister for Migration and Displacement. Mr. Johnstone acknowledged the improvement in security inside Iraq and described the situation as much healthier compared to his last visit two years ago. He also urged the Iraqi government to engage more with Iraqi refugees outside of Iraq and to include them in national reconciliation efforts. While the government had quite naturally focused in the last few years on the situation inside the country, it was now time to increase contacts with refugee communities outside Iraq and to begin fostering a climate of confidence in the future in terms of security, political assurances and protection. This in turn would help pave the way for eventual voluntary return. But we are not there yet, Johnstone said, noting that there are still pockets of insecurity and continuing uncertainty among some refugee populations.

The Deputy High Commissioner also commended the Iraqi government for implementing a compensation package for returnees and internally displaced families. He stressed, however, that much more needs to be done as there will not be a solution to the Iraqi situation as a whole until the plight of displaced people and refugees has been resolved. The provision of land for returnees and more funds are essential, Johnstone said, noting that UNHCR had increased its funding for programs inside Iraq in 2009 to US \$178 million.

Mr. Johnstone stressed the importance of providing shelter in order to prepare the ground for return of refugees and internally displaced. Since July 2008, UNHCR and its Iraqi partners have rehabilitated some 5,000 homes for returnees and internally displaced people, with another 20,000 planned by the end of 2009. The Deputy High Commissioner pledged that UNHCR will help in every way it can, particularly with respect to shelter because we accept the notion that people cannot return if they do not have safety and a home to return to. Protection and shelter are priorities for UNHCR.

Mr. Johnstone also praised the generosity of neighboring countries hosting Iraqi refugees, particularly Jordan and Syria. There are still well over 1.5 million Iraqis outside the country – mostly in Syria and Jordan – and another 2 million internally displaced.

## New transit centre in Slovakia to resettle Palestinians stuck at Iraq border

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A new transit centre has been opened in Slovakia that will allow for 98 Palestinian refugees to be removed from the desert camp of al-Walid near the Iraqi-Syrian border where they have been trapped for the last six years. They will stay at the new centre for up to six months while their final resettlement to other countries is arranged.

UNHCR has made closure this year of three camps housing Palestinian refugees trying to leave Iraq a goal because of the harsh living conditions. The highest priority is closing Al Walid, a camp about 10 km inside Iraq. Several countries have responded to UNHCR's appeal to resettle these refugees but are unable to reach them for interviews because of security concerns.

At the end of May there were 1,479 refugees in Al Walid, 843 at Al Tanf in the no-man's land between Iraq and Syria near Al Walid, and 391 Palestinian refugees at Al Hol, on the Syrian side of the border further north. A further 10,000 Palestinian refugees are in Baghdad.

After continuous attacks by local Iraqis, the first of the Palestinians now in Al Walid fled Baghdad in 2003 but were not allowed to enter Syria. They stayed in the makeshift camp near the desert border under appalling conditions. A large number of countries -- including the United States, Chile and several European countries -- have resettled some refugees over the past two years and UNHCR has a target of closing the three camps by 31 December 2009.

The agreement on the humanitarian transfer of 98 Palestinian refugees from Iraq to the new transit facility in Humenne in north-eastern Slovakia was signed in the Slovak capital of Bratislava on Monday by UNHCR, the Slovak Government and the International Organisation for Migration. The 98 refugees are expected to arrive in late August and then move to final resettlement countries.

UNHCR's deputy director of the Department of International Protection, Vincent Cochetel, thanked the Slovak government for its quick response to our appeal for help in removing the Al Walid refugees from their desert location. Slovak Interior Minister Robert Kalinak said his government was glad it had the capacity to offer a "period of safety" to these most vulnerable refugees. The representative of IOM, Argentina Szabados, said she hoped this model project would be duplicated by more EU countries.

This is the second transit facility opened to help in resettling the Palestinian refugees from Iraq. Another centre opened in Romania last year has been hosting refugees while their onward resettlement is finalized. Between the start of 2008 and the end of this May, UNHCR submitted the names of 2,902 Palestinian refugees from the three camps for resettlement; of those 603 had departed for their countries of resettlement and a further 59 were awaiting final resettlement in Romania.