

IRAQ | UNHCR COVID-19 UPDATE II

COUNTRY SITUATION *confirmed cases in Iraq: 316 | confirmed cases affecting UNHCR persons of concern: 0*

As of 25 March, 316 COVID-19 cases have been confirmed in Iraq, with 27 fatalities, most of which in Baghdad. For the time being, no cases have been identified affecting UNHCR people of concern. The situation is evolving on a daily basis and it is yet difficult to assess the overall impact of the virus on the operation, however, the actions taken by the Government to date have already affected UNHCR's ability to implement certain activities. Since mid-March, the Government of Iraq (GoI) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) have announced the following measures:

- Total lockdown in Iraq (17 to 28 March, with likely extension) except for life-saving and humanitarian activities
- Suspensions of all flights from 17 to 28 March
- Closure of Iraq-Syria border crossing points
- Disinfection campaigns in specifically identified areas
- Restriction of movement in and out of IDP and refugee camps in most governorates
- Entry ban or mandatory quarantine for foreigners arriving from certain countries
- Sermons, mass gatherings, school, and university classes temporarily suspended

While the vast majority of cases in Iraq are attributed to people who recently returned from Iran, the World Health Organization (WHO) has acknowledged that the spread of COVID-19 in Iraq has now reached community transmission levels. The number of cases is expected to continue increasing in the coming days, especially following recent pilgrimages. At this stage, robust preventative measures are the best defense against a rising caseload. WHO has stated that the relative youth of Iraq's population (60% under 25) could contribute to milder symptoms and quicker recovery for many of those infected. Community-based tracking measures are being implemented throughout the country for all suspected cases and new testing labs have been opened in Najaf and Basra with the support of WHO.

UNHCR RESPONSE

UNHCR is currently developing a contingency plan for the next six months, taking into consideration the needs of all persons of concern in Iraq, including refugees, IDPs, returnees, and stateless persons, to adjust its activities to the new scenario. The COVID-19 response and measures will be incorporated and coordinated through the existing Iraq Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) and the Iraq Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan¹ (3RP) structures at national, regional, and governorate level, and will be in conjunction with guidance and instructions from the GoI, the KRG, the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and the COVID-19 Crisis Operations Cell.

No COVID-19 cases have been identified so far affecting UNHCR people of concern. Contacts are held on a daily basis with camp management teams across the country as well as with community outreach volunteers, community mobilizers, and representatives to monitor the situation. However, the measures adopted by the GoI are temporarily altering some of the activities implemented by UNHCR. The two main challenges encountered to date remain the halt of certain activities due to movement restrictions and the closure of border crossing points between Iraq and Syria, which keeps preventing many Syrian refugees from entering Iraq as well as from returning to Syria. Under the current context, access to livelihoods and basic services is also proving increasingly challenging for displaced populations, which may result in a growing exposure of persons of concern to negative coping mechanisms.



Awareness raising in refugee and IDP camps © UNHCR

¹ The 2020-2021 Iraq 3RP (Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan) under the co-leadership of UNHCR and UNDP and in close collaboration with the KRG (Kurdistan Regional Government) Ministry of Planning was released this week: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/74758>



UNHCR supported pharmacy at a refugee camp in Iraq © UNHCR

UNHCR is in regular contact with Iraqi authorities to ensure that all persons of concern are included in national COVID-19 preparedness and response plans. Most basic services continue to be delivered in camps and in areas with a high density of displaced populations, and overall access to health services continues to be guaranteed. UNHCR is placing particular focus on ensuring that medical teams are available in camps and nearby areas and that there are identified referral routes to hospitals, as well as adequate transportation means for those requiring specialized treatment. In addition, different modalities are being assessed to ensure the continuity of critical humanitarian assistance, including change of distributions to a tent-to-tent modality to avoid large gatherings, and increase of rations distributed to reduce the frequency of tent visits.

It is worth to note that under the current scenario, all closure and consolidation of IDP camps across the country have been put on halt and authorities in most governorates have agreed to extend the deadline for closures until the situation allows it in a safe and sustainable manner. Iraqi authorities are also contributing to address the needs of displaced populations by distributing basic hygiene items, including hand sanitizer gel and masks, in certain camps, and by sterilizing areas in some governorates.

ONGOING UNHCR COVID-19 ACTIVITIES

In its efforts to limit the spread of the virus and preserve the well-being of vulnerable displaced families in Iraq, UNHCR is currently implementing the following measures across the country:

- **Health awareness:** UNHCR has started health awareness on transmission and prevention of COVID-19 in refugee and IDP camps, as well as in registration centres and in some urban areas. Posters and leaflets have been printed out and distributed through camp management, camp Primary Health Centers (PHCCs), and community outreach volunteers.
- **Provision of medical Protective Personnel Equipment (PPE):** UNHCR is procuring medical PPE, masks with filters, and disposable shoes to use at borders and in refugee camps. UNHCR will further procure other protective equipment such as surgical masks, gloves, and disposable medical gowns, for daily use by medical staff at PHCCs in refugee camp.
- **Basic Hygiene Items:** UNHCR plans to provide vulnerable IDP and refugee families, mainly in camps, with cash assistance to guarantee they have the necessary means to access adequate basic hygiene items.
- **Ongoing distribution of assistance and provision of services:** new modalities have been established to continue ensuring the distribution of assistance, this includes door-to-door and tent-to-tent distribution to avoid mass gatherings. Registration activities continue to be implemented remotely and through limiting the number of individuals in registration centres that are still open. Legal assistance and counselling continues to be provided through telephone lines.
- **Training of PHCCs medical staff in camps:** UNHCR is supporting the Directorate of Health in Duhok and in Erbil to provide training on case definition and detection, as well as on management of suspected COVID-19 cases.