

## IRAQ | UNHCR COVID-19 UPDATE III

**COUNTRY SITUATION** *confirmed cases in Iraq: 1,031 | confirmed cases affecting UNHCR persons of concern: 0*

As of 7 April, 1,031 COVID-19 cases have been confirmed in Iraq, with 64 fatalities, most of which in Baghdad, followed by Najaf and Basrah. This makes Iraq the country with the second highest number of COVID-19 related deaths in the region after Iran. For the time being, no cases have been identified affecting UNHCR people of concern.

The situation is evolving on a daily basis, and the number of affected persons is likely to continue increasing, with the World Health Organization (WHO) expecting a surge in numbers of infected cases within the coming days due to an increase in lab testing capacity. During the course of the week, the Government of Iraq (GoI) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) announced that the total lockdown in the country would be extended to 19 April, except for life-saving humanitarian activities. Other measures, including the closure of border crossing points, entry ban and mandatory quarantine for foreigners arriving from certain countries, suspension of mass gatherings, and disinfection campaigns, continue to apply. The Iraqi Health Minister recently stated that Iraq could overcome the crisis within a one-month period if people comply with the measures adopted, but emphasized that if citizens do not abide by the precautionary measures, the country could quickly face a public health crisis and may declare state of emergency. If measures to counter the spread of the virus don't prove effective, the collapse of Iraq's health system in the coming weeks is a significant risk.

### COVID-19 PROTECTION RISKS AND CHALLENGES

**No COVID-19 cases have been identified among UNHCR Persons of Concern (PoC)** including refugees, internally displaced persons, returnees, and stateless persons. UNHCR is in daily contact with camp management teams across the country as well as with community outreach volunteers, community mobilizers, and representatives to monitor the situation of PoC residing in camps and in urban, peri-urban, and rural areas. Staff are prepared to support self-isolation measures and advise refugees and displaced individuals on the steps to take should a positive case be reported. UNHCR continues to follow all protocols established by the government for cases suspected of being COVID-19 positive, which instruct to test suspected cases through national designated centres. While no cases have been reported among persons of concern to UNHCR, the measures adopted by the GoI and the KRG are temporarily affecting implementation of some activities, and certain COVID-19 related protection risks and challenges have been reported in the past weeks, including:

- **Closure of borders preventing movement of refugees:** Iraq has closed all its borders, including to asylum-seekers. Based on previous monthly arrival data, it is estimated that around 1,100 Syrian individuals may have been denied access to protection in Iraq in March. UNHCR is working with the KRG to advocate for the re-opening of border points with Syria while addressing public health concerns. UNHCR has delivered Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to KRG authorities in Duhok to facilitate health screening at border crossing points.
- **Halt of key activities due to movement restrictions:** several activities have been suspended due to the ongoing curfew. Although humanitarian activities are in principle exempted from movement restrictions, in certain governorates, UNHCR and partners are facing increasing challenges in accessing camps and reaching persons of concern. In addition, all non-essential government services are closed, including Registration Centres, Courts, and Civil Affairs Directorates and Residency Departments. As a result, many protection activities have been affected, particularly registration, legal assistance and civil documentation activities.
- **Increasing exposure to negative coping mechanisms:** under the current context, access to livelihoods and basic services is proving increasingly challenging for displaced populations, further raising their exposure to negative coping mechanisms. According to the latest assessments, the main concern for most PoC is the lack of resources to afford basic items. Some camps have reported an increase in the price of food and basic items due to partial shortage and many families have indicated their urgent need for assistance to make ends meet. UNHCR will deliver additional cash assistance to support displaced families across Iraq and ensure their access to basic items.
- **Stigmatization:** initial reports indicate that families and individuals suspected of having COVID-19 have faced stigmatization in certain areas, including hostility from neighbours, even though no positive cases have been reported to date among UNHCR PoC.

## UNHCR RESPONSE

The health, wellbeing, and dignity of displaced populations and their host communities are at the centre of UNHCR's COVID-19 prevention and response efforts in Iraq. UNHCR maintains regular contact with federal and local health authorities and has ensured the inclusion of all persons of concern, including refugees, internally displaced persons, returnees, and stateless persons, in national COVID-19 preparedness and response plans. UNHCR, along with other UN agencies, is working closely with the GoI and the KRG to support the improvement and expansion of existing health facilities and staff capacity so that all persons affected by the virus can receive adequate treatment in a timely manner. At the moment, public health facilities throughout the country continue offering services to all affected cases. Nevertheless, as the number of cases continue to rise, health facilities will be under increasing pressure. UNHCR has developed a contingency plan to ensure that all critical life-saving services and assistance continues to be delivered to all vulnerable displaced individuals across the country, particularly in refugee and IDP camps. The COVID-19 response and measures have been incorporated in the existing Iraq Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) and the Iraqi Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) in conjunction with instructions from the GoI and the KRG. In addition, UNHCR and relevant counterparts are developing a preparedness plan focussed specifically on camp-based populations to ensure as much support as possible in the event of an outbreak of COVID-19 in a camp setting.



Core relief items at Kawergosk Refugee Camp © UNHCR

UNHCR has well established procedures to continue providing services in challenging situations and maintain presence in the field as part of its stay-and-deliver commitment. In the current context, most basic services continue to function (albeit at limited capacity) in camps and in areas with a high density of displaced populations. UNHCR has adopted new distribution modalities to ensure assistance continues to be delivered, including door-to-door and telephone modalities for cash support, legal counselling, and other activities to avoid mass gatherings and respect social distancing. Through these new modalities, UNHCR continues ensuring the provision of legal assistance, counselling, protection monitoring, distribution of core relief items, assessment of refugee status determination and resettlement cases, provision of mental health and psychosocial support, remote case management for victims of sexual and gender-based violence, facilitation of access to e-learning opportunities, and provision of emergency protection cash assistance, among others.

## ONGOING COVID-19 SUPPORT ACTIVITIES

Beyond regular 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 specific measures across the country:

- **Health awareness:** UNHCR is conducting 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, and hotlines remain available for individuals seeking information and assistance. UNHCR social media sites are also broadcasting COVID-19 messaging.
- **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 camps, and is assessing the possibility of distributing additional materials to public health facilities.
- **Basic Hygiene Items:** UNHCR plans to provide vulnerable IDP and refugee families, mainly in camps, with an additional tranche of cash assistance to guarantee they have the necessary means to access adequate basic hygiene items.
- **Training of PHCCs medical staff in camps:** UNHCR is supporting the health authorities to provide training to sanitary staff on case definition and detection, as well as on management of suspected COVID-19 cases.

**In these challenging times, aid must not become a victim of COVID-19.** Humanitarian action to save lives and alleviate the suffering of vulnerable populations remains imperative. Additional resources are needed to prevent the spread of the virus in Iraq and ensure that existing humanitarian programmes, on which the lives and welfare of millions of people depend, continue.