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IRAQ: Forced repatriation puts minorities at risk



Photo: B. Heger/UNHCR

Iraqis crowd Syria's immigration centre (file photo)

MADRID, 20 June 2010 (IRIN) - Refugee officials and rights groups have urged a number of European countries not to forcibly repatriate Iraqi asylum seekers, particularly members of minority communities, because of prevailing insecurity in the country.

These demands were made in response to recent announced repatriation plans by the UK, Sweden, the Netherlands and Norway. The UK has already begun deporting some Iraqis, with some 40 asylum-seekers arriving in Baghdad on 17 June – the UK's third deportation in that week.

"Our position and advice to governments is that Iraqi asylum applicants originating from Iraq's governorates of Baghdad, Diyala, Ninewa and Salah-al-Din, as well as from Kirkuk province, should continue to benefit from international protection," Melissa Fleming, a spokesperson for the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), said at a [press briefing](#) on 8 June.

"Our position reflects the volatile security situation and the still high level of prevailing violence, security incidents, and human rights violations taking

place in these parts of Iraq," she said.

While its deportations have been criticized for being highly secretive, the British government has insisted the people it was repatriating were from safer parts of Iraq. UNHCR has expressed concern that the forced returns send the wrong message to host countries neighbouring Iraq, namely Syria and Jordan.

Minority attacks

Iraqi minorities - including Christians of various denominations, Yazidis and the Shabak – living in third countries are particularly fearful of any forced returns.

A Chaldean Christian Iraqi refugee who has lived in the Netherlands since 2006 told IRIN on condition of anonymity that he feared being singled out for deportation because of the many attacks against his community in Iraq.

"Kidnappings and politically motivated killings continue to take place in what seems to be an attempt to resettle or eradicate Iraq's indigenous population," he said.

He is one of more than half a million Iraqi Christians who have fled since the US-led invasion of the country in 2003. According to the US-based Brookings Institution, an estimated 500,000 Christians remain in Iraq out of a population that numbered between 1 million and 1.4 million before 2003.

"Christians continue to be targeted and there is no protection from the Iraqi authorities," said Dr Ghazi Rahho, a Christian Iraqi who fled the country several years ago and now works as a professor in Jordan.

Rahho's cousin, Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho, a leading Christian authority in Iraq, was kidnapped and killed in February 2008, an incident that led to some 12,000 Christians fleeing Mosul, about 400km northwest of Baghdad. "To date, kidnappings and assassinations are taking place. And other tactics are used to terrorize Christians. Our churches, for instance, are being bombed," said Rahho.

According to an April 2010 Amnesty International (AI) [report](#), more than 100 people were killed between mid-July and mid-September 2009 in attacks targeting Christians, Sabeen-Mandaeans, Yazidis, Turkoman Shias, Shabaks and Kaka'is.

AI has called on the international community to "end all forcible returns to any part of Iraq; any return of rejected asylum-seekers should only take place when the security situation in the whole country has stabilized."

NGO Minority Rights Group International has detailed evidence of violence against Iraq's minority communities in a [June 10 report](#) and expressed an urgent need for legislation implementing minority rights in the country to address an "ongoing climate of impunity that exists in relation to attacks on minorities".

Iraqi refugee landmark

Meanwhile, [UNHCR announced](#) on 18 June that a landmark 100,000 Iraqis had been referred for resettlement from the Middle East to third countries since 2007. About 45 percent of that number lives in Syria, UNHCR said, adding that the referrals acceptance rate by host countries was 80 percent, of which 76 percent were accepted by the US.

Iraqis are the second largest refugee group in the world, according to UNHCR's 2009 [Global Trends report](#), with an estimated 1.8 million seeking refuge primarily in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Turkey.

The report, released in advance of World Refugee Day on 20 June, said voluntary repatriation worldwide in 2009 was the lowest for 20 years, with around 251,500 returns, of which only 38,000 were Iraqi.

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