

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	362
Land:	Syrien
Kilde:	UN High Commissioner for Refugees.
Titel:	Thousands of Syrian refugees stream into Iraq.
Udgivet:	18. august 2013
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	4. september 2013



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Publisher [UN High Commissioner for Refugees](#)

Publication Date 18 August 2013

Cite as UN High Commissioner for Refugees, *Thousands of Syrian refugees stream into Iraq*, 18 August 2013, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5211c4394.html> [accessed 4 September 2013]

Thousands of Syrian refugees have been streaming into northern Iraq today (Sunday) moving in a wave of people loaded down with their belongings.

"Authorities at the Sahela border crossing report that more than 5,000 Syrians have arrived and many more are headed to the frontier," said Claire Bourgeois, UNHCR Representative in Iraq. "UN refugee agency staff at Sahela today report what appears like a river of people coming towards the border."

"The number of people moving across the frontier today is quite significant," Bourgeois declared. "UNHCR is witnessing a major exodus from Syria over the past few days unlike anything we have witnessed entering Iraq previously."

On Saturday, more than 10,000 Syrians streamed across the Peshkhabour bridge over the Tigris River, north of the Sahela crossing, as people continued to flee areas in northern Syria stretching from northwest of Aleppo eastwards. Many refugees said they were fleeing fighting involving various armed groups and increasing tension in areas of northern Syria including Efrin, Aleppo, Hassake and Qamishly.

Authorities estimate that more than 15,000 Syrians crossed into Iraq on Thursday and Saturday at the Peshkhabour pontoon bridge over the Tigris River.

The on-going exodus adds sharply to the number of Syrians in Iraq. Prior to Thursday some 154,000 Syrians had registered as refugees in Iraq.

UNHCR and its partners have erected shelters with plastic tarpaulins at both the Sahela and Peshkhabour crossings to protect fleeing Syrians from the sun and heat while they await transport from the border using a fleet of hundreds of vehicles organized by the International Organisation for Migration and the Kurdistan Regional Government. Together with the authorities and its NGO partners, UNHCR is distributing water and food to the new arrivals.

UNHCR has sent 37 trucks loaded with relief items and sanitary supplies including tents, mattresses, jerry cans, tarpaulins, blankets, hygienic kits, kitchen sets, stoves, water tanks, latrines, showers and electric fans to help the new arrivals.

"UNHCR is grateful for the close cooperation and support of the Iraqi Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government in opening the border and assisting these new arrivals," said UNHCR's Claire Bourgeois.

Aid workers reported desperate scenes amidst the summer heat as families swarmed across the pontoon bridge at Peshkhabour on Saturday. Prior to last Thursday's arrivals, Iraq's border with Syria had been sharply regulated since mid-May, aside from some 700 Syrians who were allowed to cross on 15th July for medical reasons and to rejoin relatives.

In conjunction with regional authorities, UNHCR has opened a transit site at Kawergost town, near Khabat in Erbil Governorate. Some 7,000 Syrian refugees are currently encamped at the transit site. Some 600 tents have been erected at the transit area and a further 250 tents are planned.

Kurdish Regional Government authorities have transferred 4,000 of the new arrivals to a school in Sulemaniyah Governorate further eastwards where another temporary transit site is under construction. Others are being accommodated with relatives or in mosques.

In cooperation with the Kurdish Regional Government, UNHCR and its partners are building Darashakran camp, which is expected to begin accommodating refugees by the end of August. UNHCR built Domiz refugee camp near Dohuk, Iraq earlier this year. Domiz, originally constructed to accommodate 15,000 Syrian refugees, is currently overcrowded with more than 55,000 residents

UNHCR oversees aid to more than 1.9 million Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries.

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