



ISIS advance adds to aid challenges in Iraq's north

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As fighting grows between Islamist insurgents and government forces in Iraq, aid agencies are straining to support the hundreds of thousands of people displaced by the violence amid unclear government policies, lack of funding and a multiplicity of humanitarian actors flooding in to respond.

In Erbil, capital of the semi-autonomous northern Kurdish region, hotel lobbies are cluttered with families, some sleeping as many as 10 to a room, while those without the luxury of savings are sleeping rough in parks and unfinished buildings or sheltering in mosques and churches.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), working with aid agencies, has set up several tented camps close to the checkpoints along the border between Kurdistan and the rest of Iraq, but so far only a few thousand people have stopped there, most preferring to escape the desert dust and heat and push on into urban areas.

The confusion about where and how to settle people was reflected last week in a confrontation, witnessed by IRIN, between the Kurdish security services, the Aysaish, and a gathering of around 100 internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the city of Tikrit in Salaheddin Province. The group, all loosely part of one family, had been sleeping in parks or their cars at sites around Erbil, but were rounded up by the Aysaish and taken to a campsite 5km from the city's edge.

The Baharka camp, in a remote location amid rolling fields and next to an old agricultural facility, was initially created in 2013 to host Syrian refugees. Earlier this year, it was revived to support displaced people fleeing fighting in Iraq's Anbar Province, but again, no one wanted to stay there.

The group from Tikrit also refused to stay. They said they would rather go back home to danger than settle there, so they picked up the mattresses, blankets and other non-food-items that had been dropped off there by various NGOs and UN agencies one day earlier - and left.

The incident is believed to be isolated and was put down to a misunderstanding, but it highlights the growing tensions around the management of IDPs.

Layers of crisis

According to statistics compiled jointly by the UN and Iraq's Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MOMD) and released on 24 June, a surge in violence in Iraq has displaced more than 1.2 million people since January.

Thirteen out of Iraq's 18 governorates are now hosting IDPs. Nearly half are scattered across the western province of Anbar, where militants from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and other groups have been fighting against government forces since January, displacing an estimated 480,000 to 700,000 in six months (the numbers are not very clear).

After ISIS and other militants took control of Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, on 9 June, a new wave of up to 500,000 IDPs is adding to the burden.

"This crisis is so worrying because it's so fast moving," said Sheri Ritsema-Anderson, a humanitarian affairs officer with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) based in Erbil. "Literally every day there are new spurts of fighting and displacement popping up."

Already, KRG was hosting more than 220,000 Syrian refugees.

"You have the existing layer, the refugee layer and now this displacement," Ritsema-Anderson said. "There are multiple layers of IDPs here in Iraq, some going back 10 years or more. They are all over the country and the layers are extremely complex."

In an open-fronted, half-built hotel building in the shadow of Erbil's ancient citadel, a group of men dressed in white robes sit cross-legged on a blanket stretched out between bags of concrete mix and scaffolding bars.

Wires hang down from exposed grey brick walls and diesel fumes from a generator on the pavement outside fill the air in temperatures of around 40 degrees Celsius.

Downstairs in a low-ceiling basement, veiled women huddle in a dark corner. At least two are pregnant, and several clutch babies and toddlers who squirm uncomfortably in the heat, their eyes reddened from the dust. They have barely left this room in days, relying on passers-by for food and water.

The group, totalling 45, said they fled Tikrit the week before, when ISIS militants stormed the city, triggering a wave of bomb attacks from the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the subsequent scale-up of mobilization of Sunni and Shia militia groups countrywide.

"We left everything behind, we just got in the car and drove," explained Abu Waleed*, who presented himself as a spokesman. "We had to leave. They were attacking civilians and bombs were falling on houses around us. (Read Abu Waleed's full story)

"But now that we are here, we have nothing. Look what we are living in! And even though it is not safe, I think we will have to go back as we cannot stay here in these conditions for much longer."

Parachute aid

UN agencies and NGOs are delivering large volumes of food parcels, tents, blankets and mattresses to people across Kurdistan and inside some parts of Nineveh Province, to which Mosul belongs. At camp sites, they are providing latrines and water tanks and offering health care to those injured from bombs as well as pregnant women and those with chronic diseases.

However, the speed and scale of displacement has tested logistics and mobilization. According to several people IRIN spoke to, duplicated distributions and a lack of coordination have hampered the effort.

For instance, Khazair, the main camp on the border between Erbil and Nineveh provinces, is now being moved and with it over 1,000 IDPs. The work to prepare the new site will, however, take several weeks, during which time the current facility will not receive badly needed upgrades to sanitation and other services. (Read more about the transit camps)

One European NGO worker, who has been based in Iraq for nearly three years, joked that the influx of humanitarian staff into Kurdistan - and not the influx of IDPs - was the cause of some of the problems.

Last week, several dozen UN officials were relocated to Erbil from Baghdad due to security concerns in the Iraqi capital. A number of international NGOs have also bolstered their presence in Kurdistan.

"So many people have parachuted in in recent weeks. It's creating confusion and it's not helpful," the aid worker said. "We've had duplications in distributions while some areas are not being reached at all. I don't think as a humanitarian community we have been as effective as we should or could have been."

Ambiguous status

Unlike Syrian refugees, who are registered on a central database and allowed to work, the legal status of newly arriving IDPs is less clear-cut, even though they are Iraqi citizens.

KRG manages its border with the rest of Iraq very carefully and all non-Kurdish Iraqis are subject to strict security checks before being allowed through.

Without a Kurdish sponsor or other similar security clearance, access is not always granted. Those that are given access are issued either tourist visas or temporary residency passes.

These can last 7-20 days, and there are no fixed rules on how or where these can be renewed - with aid workers urging for more clarity.

"They are expected to go back to the border point where they crossed, but due to limited resources and other hardships, many families cannot afford to make this trip," said Jahangir Durrani, a senior protection officer with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

One aid source told IRIN that a number of IDPs who travelled back to checkpoints have not been able to renew their permits and have been sent across the border out of Kurdistan - back to areas where fighting is still taking place.

Humanitarian access to some parts of Nineveh, Salaheddin and Kirkuk provinces is extremely limited. Those that do go back face shortages of food, water, fuel and electricity and limited healthcare services.

"So many people have parachuted in in recent weeks. It's creating confusion and it's not helpful. We've had duplications in distributions while some areas are not being reached at all. I don't think as a humanitarian community we have been as effective as we should or could have been." With such a good security record compared to the rest of Iraq, no one blames KRG for wanting to control its entry points to keep potential threats out, but this tough policy-stance has its victims too.

"There's been a definite tightening of access by the KRG," a UN employee said, asking to remain anonymous. "It's being floated that as many as 70 percent of people who came into Kurdistan in the past few weeks have gone back because they can't afford to be here any more, but truly we don't know the real numbers."

The UN staffer added: "There is an attitude developing among the authorities that because some people have gone back, it must be safe, and this is a concern because this attitude could lead to people in need being blocked from entering."

Dindar Zebari, the deputy head of KRG's Department for Foreign Relations (DFR), who is leading the IDP response for the government, said it was up to Kurdistan's security services to manage its borders and that it was too soon to be setting a policy on IDPs.

"With the large number of IDPs, there are challenges ahead of us and it's quite difficult to decide right now. It has to be in line with security measures in place and we have to decide what is the best practice. Frankly, I don't know," he told IRIN during an interview at his office in Erbil.

No one really knows exactly how many people have been displaced since ISIS started its surge into the northern city of Mosul and more widely in Nineveh Province.

In the absence of a formal registration database, UN agencies have created an online mapping tool to try to track where families are settling and profile their protection needs in order to help target the response more effectively.

Meetings were due to be held this week to analyse a possible registration system for the IDPs and seek clarity on permit renewals.

Show me the money

Another challenge for KRG is funding. Spending is frozen until the 2014 Iraq budget is passed by parliament, which will not happen until a new government is formed. Given the deteriorating security situation and pressure for leadership change, this may take weeks or even months.

"This is a big problem for us," sighed Zebari. "We have had very, very little support from the Federal Government even though these people are Iraqi citizens."

The deputy minister added: "We have not been able to pay public salaries in Kurdistan for five months and now we must find the money to construct camps and help these people. We need urgent support from the international community."

Donor funding for Iraq, however, is becoming hard to tap. More than a decade of seemingly never-ending unrest and a government which is perceived to be rich due to its oil reserves has turned off many givers.

In March, the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) launched an appeal for US\$103million to support those displaced from Anbar, but after three months had raised barely 10 percent, with officials warning that programmes were at risk if more money could not be raised soon. This week, the appeal was increased to \$312 million to reflect the escalating situation countrywide and the growing caseload of IDPs.

Although ISIS (and subsequent ISF retaliation) was the trigger for the mass exodus from the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi in January, the jihadi outfit's advance across central Iraq this month has received significantly more media attention than its activity in Anbar.

OCHA's Ritsema-Anderson said she hoped the higher profile would generate more donor interest and help secure more cash for the response.

"If we don't get more funds rapidly, we are not going to be able to keep pace with the needs and that then compounds the situation," she said. "We need to get basic systems in place, and get all the foundations strong so we are not just left firefighting."

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