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Turkish, Iranian shelling displaces villagers in north

SULAIMANIYAH, 5 July 2010 (IRIN) - Turkish and Iranian shelling of rebel positions in northern Iraq has forced hundreds of Iraqi Kurdish families out of their border villages into tent camps, local officials said on 4 July.

"We now have two camps. One is home to 530 families and the other accommodates 125 families, while there are dozens of others who have ended up in relatives' houses due to the continued Turkish and Iranian shelling on rebels," said Abdullah Ibrahim, mayor of the border town of Sangasar in Sulaimaniyah Governorate and part of autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan.

"These villagers are living a miserable life now. They have left their villages and orchards because of a conflict they have nothing to do with. Despite some aid being distributed by the government and NGOs, they are still in dire need of more," he said.

To help displaced villagers, the Iraqi government has ordered the payment of one million Iraqi dinars (US\$850) to each family, but only a few have received the money so far because of slow bureaucratic procedures, Ibrahim said.

Militants from the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Iranian Party for Free Life in Kurdistan (PEJAK) have used northern Iraq as a springboard for hit-and-run attacks on Turkish and Iranian targets since 1984. Both are fighting for autonomy in the predominantly Kurdish areas of southeastern Turkey and northwestern Iran. More than 40,000 people, mainly Kurds, have died in the intermittent war.

With imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan announcing in May that he had given up any hope of dialogue with the Turkish government, a ceasefire between the two sides deteriorated and attacks on both sides of the border have been stepped up, with reports of dozens of Turkish soldiers, Kurdish fighters and civilians being killed in recent weeks. The Iraqi government has rejected Turkey's plea for assistance.

"Ended up as beggars"

Crammed into a small tent in Dara Koter camp in the Qandil mountain range, which borders Iran and Turkey, Rassol Khidre and his six-member family wait anxiously for an end to the fighting.

"We are suffering every day. We have a lot of problems. We don't have enough water for washing and drinking and we don't have appropriate toilets," Khidre, 65, told IRIN. "We have a good life back in our villages. We need a swift political solution so that we can go back to our orchards."

There are still no official figures on the damage to villages, livestock and orchards in the border towns and villages of Iraqi Kurdistan, 350-400km north of Baghdad.

Hoshiyar Mustafa, a spokesperson for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), said families were still fleeing their villages and "more tents and aid material are needed." He said ICRC teams were distributing aid packages including rice, cooking oil, beans, lentils, tea and detergents but there was not enough to go round and

recipients were asking for cooking gas and kerosene.

"We have ended up as beggars," Abdullah Kaka Waise, a displaced 55-year-old father-of-five, said from Dara Koter camp. "I didn't need anything from the government while I was living in my village except to live in peace, but we are left now between two fires: the fire of the rebels and the fire of the ignorance of the government."

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