

CIVILIANS WITHOUT PROTECTION

The ever-worsening humanitarian crisis in Iraq



ICRC

The humanitarian situation is steadily worsening and it is affecting, directly or indirectly, all Iraqis.

Protecting Iraq's civilian population must be a priority, and the ICRC urgently calls for better respect for international humanitarian law. It appeals to all those with military or political influence on the ground to act now to ensure that the lives of ordinary Iraqis are spared and protected. This is an obligation under international humanitarian law for both States and non-State actors.

The ICRC aims to ensure that Iraqis receive the aid they need most. It cooperates closely with the Iraqi Red Crescent. However, humanitarian aid is clearly not enough when it comes to addressing the immense needs of Iraqis in the present disastrous security situation.



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A conflict that spares no one

The conflict in Iraq is inflicting immense suffering on the entire population. Civilians bear the brunt of the relentless violence and the extremely poor security conditions that are disrupting the lives and livelihoods of millions. Every day, dozens of people are killed and many more wounded. The plight of Iraqi civilians is a daily reminder of the fact that there has long been a failure to respect their lives and dignity.

Shootings, bombings, abductions, murders, military operations and other forms of violence are forcing thousands of people to flee their homes and seek safety elsewhere in Iraq or in neighbouring countries. The hundreds of thousands of displaced people scattered across Iraq find it particularly difficult to cope with the ongoing crisis, as do the families who generously agree to host them.

Health-care facilities are stretched to the limit as they struggle to cope with mass casualties day-in, day-out. Many sick and injured people do not go to hospital because it's too dangerous, and the patients and medical staff in those facilities are frequently threatened or targeted.

Food shortages have been reported in several areas. According to the Iraqi Red Crescent, malnutrition has increased over the past year. The vastly inadequate water, sewage and electricity infrastructure is presenting a risk to public health.



REUTERS/ALI JASIM, COURTESY



SAMIR MIZBAN/AP PHOTOS

Unemployment and poverty levels are rising and many families continue to rely on government food distributions to cover their immediate needs. According to government sources, an estimated one third of the population lives in poverty, while over five percent live in extreme poverty.

Much of Iraq's vital infrastructure is in a poor state of repair owing to lack of maintenance and because security constraints have impeded repair work on electrical power grids, water and sanitation systems, medical facilities and other essential facilities.

Power shortages are growing worse throughout the country, including northern areas, owing largely to the failure to carry out maintenance and to increase generation capacity. Fuel shortages affecting power stations and acts of sabotage are further aggravating the crisis. As a result, water-treatment plants, primary health-care centres and hospitals rely mainly on back-up generators, which often break down owing to excess usage or fall victim to the chronic fuel shortages.

The destructive legacy of previous conflicts, from 1980 onwards, and the years of international sanctions imposed on Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait in 1990 are further exacerbating the current crisis.

"Once I was called to an explosion site. There I saw a four-year-old boy sitting beside his mother's body, which had been decapitated by the explosion. He was talking to her, asking her what had happened. He had been taken out shopping by his mom."

Saad, a young humanitarian worker from Baghdad.

"Some time ago, there was a shooting near Abu Hanifa Mosque between the police and an armed group. A young man passing by was hit stray bullets and lay badly wounded and crying out for help. Because of the gunfire, nobody could get close to him to drag him out. He bled to death right in front of us."

Raad, a shopkeeper in the Adhamia area of Baghdad

"I was accosted by gunmen who gave me two hours to leave my home, together with my wife and three children. They told me not to take any of my belongings, not even my children's clothes."

Saad, an engineer from the Hurriya area in Baghdad

"You're lucky if you get a warning to leave your home. If you do, it means at least you have a chance to survive. You must be ready to flee your place any moment."

An ICRC employee in Baghdad

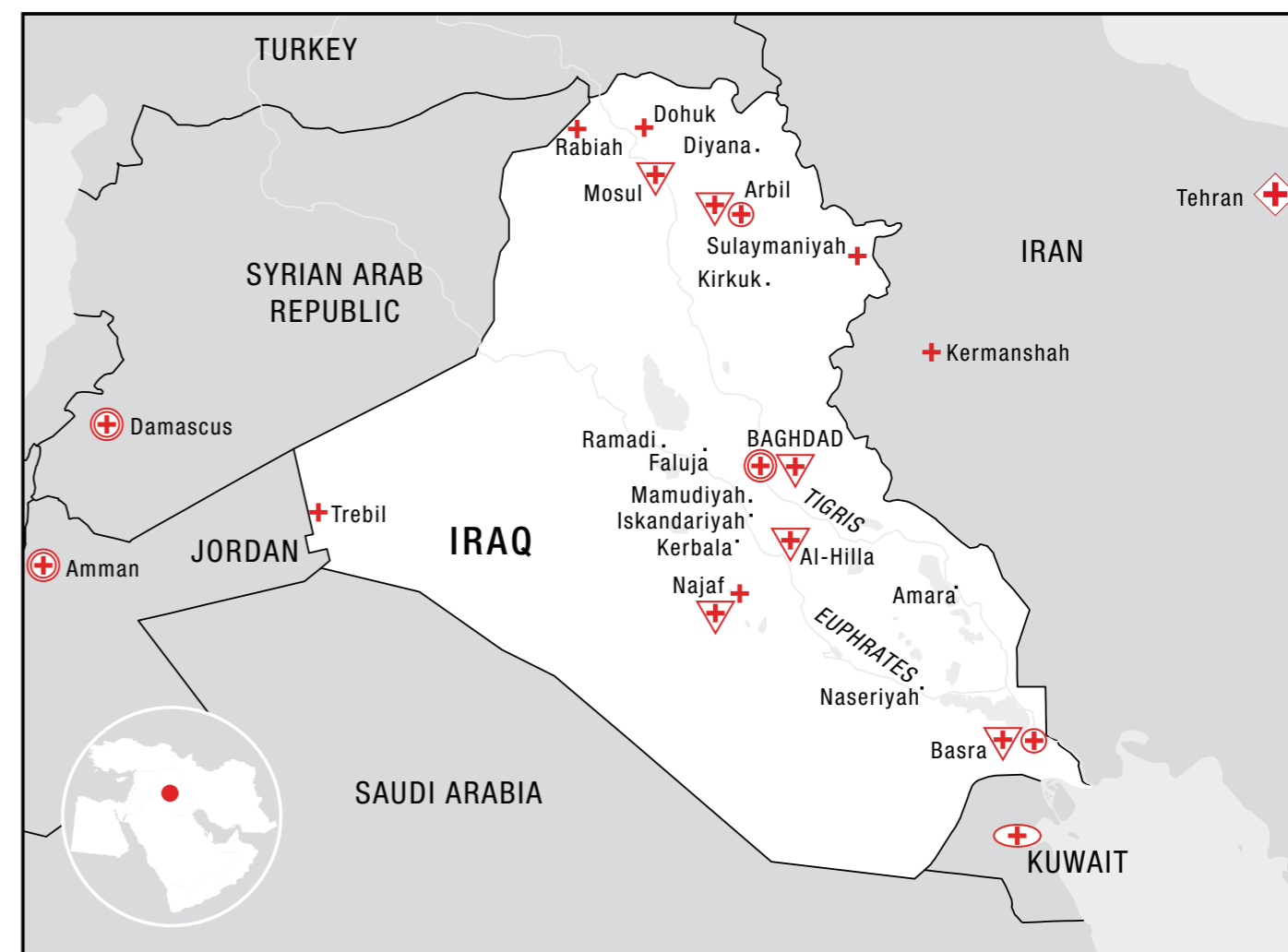
The ICRC in Iraq

Iraqi Red Crescent Society
 18 branches
 135 offices in local communities
 Over 1,500 staff and 9,000 active volunteers

Despite the difficult security situation, the ICRC spares no effort to help the families most in need. It works closely with the Iraqi Red Crescent, which regularly distributes relief provided by the ICRC and collects and delivers Red Cross messages (brief personal messages to relatives made otherwise unreachable by armed conflict).

The ICRC – a strictly humanitarian organization committed to the principles of neutrality, independence and impartiality – strives to monitor and promote respect for international humanitarian law and other legal standards applicable to the current situation in Iraq.

The ICRC started working in Iraq in 1980. Since 2003, it has been one of a handful international organizations with a constant operational presence in central, southern and northern parts of the country. The ICRC works in close partnership with the Iraqi Red Crescent Society.



- ⊕ ICRC regional delegation
- ⊕ ICRC delegation
- ⊕ ICRC sub-delegation
- + ICRC office
- ⊕ ICRC-supported prosthetic/orthotic centre
- ⊕ ICRC mission

Sliding to disaster

Since the bombing of the sacred Shiite shrine of Samarra in February 2006 and the subsequent increase in violence, the problem of displacement in Iraq has become particularly acute. Thousands of Iraqis continue to be forced out of their homes owing to military operations, general poor security and the destruction of houses. And the outlook is bleak, particularly in Baghdad and other areas with mixed communities, where the situation is likely to worsen.

Most displaced people have taken refuge with host families, who often struggle to cope with the additional burden on their limited resources. Some have found refuge in camps, public buildings and abandoned military barracks. Where displaced people decide to seek refuge often depends on the presence of relatives or friends and, because of the prevailing sectarian violence, on the religious or ethnic make-up of the host community.

The Iraqi Red Crescent estimates that approximately 106,000 families have been displaced inside the country since February 2006. It estimates that two thirds of the displaced are women and children, often living in female-headed households.



Abu Ahmed, from a displaced family

"My family is Shiite. We live together with a Sunni family. Both families were forced to leave their homes by militias. There are 30 of us, sharing the same living space: 14 children and 14 adults, including grannies on both sides. We live on an abandoned construction site and protect ourselves from the weather with plastic sheets provided by the ICRC along with food supplies. The adult members of both families are trying to keep on working, taking any job we can find. But what we don't earn enough to live decently."



"The ICRC is providing monthly emergency aid for 60,000 people among the worst affected by the situation," says Barbara Huntziker, ICRC relief coordinator for Iraq. "We work closely with the Red Crescent, which handles the bulk of the distributions. Our aim is to improve people's lives by making sure they have food and other items essential to their survival. Those we help include both displaced families and the people hosting them. We also support the destitute, families headed by widows and people with special needs such as the disabled and orphans."

Frequently, both the displaced families and the communities hosting them are badly in need of shelter materials, access to clean water, adequate sanitation, food and other essentials.

The displacement of hundreds of thousands of people places an additional burden on Iraq's basic infrastructure, which is barely sufficient to serve the resident population.

Humanitarian aid is needed by a wide range of particularly vulnerable civilians, including elderly and disabled people and female-headed households.

International humanitarian law and displaced people

Internally displaced persons are protected by international humanitarian law and the ICRC gives them priority as civilians in particular need of its help.

International humanitarian law, which is legally binding on both States and non-state actors, provides an adequate legal basis for addressing the problem of internal displacement caused by armed conflict.

The most effective way of preventing displacement is to respect the rights of the civilian population in the event of armed conflict or other situations of violence. No person in need should go unassisted or unprotected.

Medical care under threat

Medical professionals are fleeing the country in large numbers following the murder or abduction of colleagues. Hospitals and other key services are desperately short of qualified staff. According to the Iraqi Ministry of Health, more than half the doctors have left the country.

The mass influx of casualties to hospitals following the daily attacks against civilians and other violent incidents is putting the health-care system under tremendous additional strain. Staff and resources are often stretched to the limit.

The failure to observe the special status of medical staff and facilities is a major concern. A hospital director in Baghdad told the ICRC that poor security conditions were preventing staff from providing medical services. And there have been frequent reports of armed men storming hospitals and forcing doctors to give their companions priority treatment at the expense of others in more urgent need.

Road-blocks and check-points sometimes prevent doctors and patients from reaching health-care centres in time. The lack of security also hampers the distribution of medical supplies in many parts of Iraq.

International humanitarian law and medical care

Both States and non-State parties to armed conflict are obliged to protect medical staff and facilities and to ensure access to adequate health and medical services for all people at all times.

"With attacks being carried out daily, it is as if Baghdad were in a state of constant emergency. We are doing our best to cope with the influx of casualties with the means at our disposal, with the support of the Ministry of Health and the help of the ICRC. Our surgical wards are always full and working conditions are extremely difficult. Of the 208 surgeons who used to work here, only 40 or so are still on duty today."

Dr Adel Al-Shammari, director of Al-Kindi Teaching Hospital, Baghdad (February 2007)

Over the past year, the ICRC has provided medicines and surgical supplies sufficient to treat and operate up to 3,000 war-wound victims at various facilities. These include the Al-Imam, Al-Kindi, Al-Yarmouk, Al-Nauman hospitals and the Medical City facility in Baghdad, as well as various facilities in Al Anbar, Karbala, Mosul, Kirkuk, Najaf, Basra, Missan, Qadisiyah and Arbil governorates. In addition, the ICRC has pre-positioned surgical and medical supplies kits across the country to facilitate a rapid response to emergencies.



"When I was giving birth to my daughter I had to call a midwife since no maternity hospitals were functioning in Baquba. After delivery, I had severe complications. I bled heavily for eight days. A transfusion was impossible and I kept losing consciousness. Eventually, I was taken to Baghdad with all the risks and hazards of the journey. I don't know how I managed to survive."

Myriam from Baquba



Technician prepares prosthetic leg to be fitted on Iraqi amputee

REUTERS/FALEH KHEIBER, COURTESY

Ahmed, 23, from Rasafa district in Baghdad

Because of the increasingly difficult living conditions in Baghdad, Ahmed had to leave school and start working at the market to earn his living. His mother died and his father left. He now lives with his grandfather. In December 2006 he was caught in a huge explosion at the market, which left many people killed and injured.

"The only thing I remember is waking up on a hospital bed without my legs," he remembers. "I didn't feel like living anymore, but my grandfather kept on encouraging me, asking around about the best place where I could get artificial legs."

On the advice of friends, Ahmed went to the limb-fitting and rehabilitation centre run by the ICRC in Arbil. He was told that his wounds had not healed yet and he needed to wait before being treated.

Ahmed felt very depressed, but the centre's staff encouraged him. "I was reimbursed for the costs of returning to Baghdad," he says. "They even gave me some more money so that I could come back when I'm ready. I'm looking forward to being able to walk again."

Dirty and scarce – the water crisis

Both the quantity and quality of drinking water in Iraq remain insufficient despite limited improvements in some areas, mainly in the south. Water is often contaminated owing to the poor repair of sewage and water-supply networks and the discharge of untreated sewage into rivers, which are the main source of drinking water. Electricity and fuel shortages and the poor maintenance of infrastructure mean that there is no regular and reliable supply of clean water and that sewage is often not properly disposed of.

Besides carrying out maintenance and repair work to ensure emergency water supplies, the ICRC is also trucking drinking water daily to displaced and other particularly vulnerable people. It also distributes water in sealed plastic bags.



Torn apart – The fate of separated families

The conflict has torn apart many families, with relatives being detained or fleeing their homes to seek safety elsewhere in Iraq or outside the country. Dispersed members of families often need help to locate loved ones and restore contact. Some have been without news of their loved ones for many years.



Tens of thousands of people are currently being detained by the Iraqi authorities and the multinational forces in Iraq. Many families remain without news of relatives who went missing during past conflicts or the current hostilities.

Visiting people detained in connection with the armed conflict in Iraq remains a humanitarian priority for the ICRC. Persons held by the multinational forces or the Kurdish regional government are regularly visited to assess their conditions of detention and treatment.

Family-visit programme

The ICRC helps families of detainees held at Camp Bucca and Shaiba to visit them there. It provides monthly financial aid for close relatives to cover part of their travel expenses such as transportation and accommodation. Most of the families, who come from all over Iraq, cannot afford long and expensive trips. Since the ICRC's family-visit programme started in 2005, it has enabled over 6,500 detainees to receive visits.

Wives of detainees

"It has been three years since I last saw my husband. Ever since he was detained, I have been running our household alone. In the Middle East, all the daily problems and family business are dealt with by the men. Raising children, above all boys, without a father present is a huge challenge. Children need role models and I can't be both mother and father figure. The years pass and the children grow up. I'm trying to prepare them for the day when they will go 'out there' and face the world. It's hard to do all alone."

The ICRC in 2006

- Over 227,000 people, mostly members of displaced families, received food aid in various parts of Iraq. Over 161,000 people received essential household items.
- Some 83,000 people, including members of displaced families, had their water supply ensured through emergency ICRC water and sanitation projects.
- In all, over four million people benefited from water and sanitation projects.
- Twenty major hospitals in Hilla, Baghdad, Diwaniya, Karbala, Najaf and Tal Afar received medical and surgical supplies for the treatment of wounded patients.
- Eight limb-fitting centres in Baghdad, Hilla, Najaf and Basra were supported by the ICRC, as was an Iraqi Red Crescent centre in Mosul. This was in addition to the Arbil centre, which is run entirely by the ICRC. In all, these centres helped nearly 21,000 patients, who received 7,300 artificial and some 460 pairs of crutches.
- Twelve hospital emergency wards received new equipment.
- Ten hospitals, with a combined capacity to treat some 5,000 inpatients, had their water and sanitation systems repaired.
- Sixty-seven primary health-care centres in Anbar, Babel, Baghdad, Diwaniya, Karbala, Salah Al Deen and Wasit governorates had their sanitation facilities repaired or upgraded. They treat an average of over 9,000 patients per day.
- More than 32,000 detainees were visited, almost 9,000 of them individually, during 109 visits to 28 places of detention.
- Nearly 6,400 detainees held in Camp Bucca and in the Shaiba facility benefited from the ICRC family-visit programme.
- Nearly 37,000 Red Cross messages were delivered and over 30,500 collected by the ICRC in conjunction with the Iraqi Red Crescent.

For further information, please see our website: <http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/iraq-update-311207>