

REFUGEES

NUMBER 146 • ISSUE 2 • 2007

Iraq Bleeds

**MILLIONS
DISPLACED
BY CONFLICT,
PERSECUTION
AND
VIOLENCE**



SUCCESS STORY: THE AMAZING REFUGEE ALL STARS OF SIERRA LEONE

Silent exodus

WHEN CHOOSING THE PHOTOGRAPHS for this magazine, we came across an extraordinary number of pictures featuring blood. Not just blood-covered faces, hands and clothes, but streams of blood running through market places, along sidewalks. Large pools of blood with people standing beside them, sometimes even standing in them.

People behaving strangely. A small girl looking, without visible emotion, at a pool of blood with an upturned sandal perched in the middle like a small island. A well-dressed elderly man with a briefcase, walking briskly past another pool of blood, looking as if he is on his way to work on a normal day in a normal city. And many other pictures, too gruesome to mention.

Look at these pictures (only the least ghastly have made it into the world's press) and it is easy to understand why so many Iraqis have fled their homes, and so many more would if they could – and maybe still will, if security does not improve substantially and fast.

A sizeable proportion of the close to four million displaced Iraqis (1.9 million inside the country, and as many as 2 million outside) were already displaced when the most recent war began in March 2003. They had slipped out quietly over the previous decade or two, escaping individual and mass persecution by the Saddam Hussein regime, escaping conscription for the murderous eight-year war with Iran and the 1991 Gulf War, escaping the sanctions which followed during much of the 1990s – or escaping all these things.

Then came another war, more bombing, foreign troops, more displacement – and the subsequent opening of the Pandora's box of sectarianism that so many had feared could accompany any major destabilization in Iraq. The past two years have seen a sustained, ruthless and all too successful attempt by extremists to trigger large-scale sectarian violence, to make Iraqi society turn in on itself and tear itself apart. And, in response, continuing combat operations by military forces have also contributed to the cycle of destruction and displacement.

Iraqis have had to endure three decades of almost ceaseless torment of one sort or another. It is scarcely surprising so many have left. It is perhaps more surprising that so many have stayed. If they are to continue to do so, they will need a huge

improvement in security, and more aid inside the country.

The socio-economic and security indicators coming out of Iraq make stark reading. The average number killed each day was – at least up until February – believed to be around 100. Two out of five adults are traumatized. Fifty percent of the working population is unemployed. Many schools have closed because of insecurity. Thousands of doctors, teachers and other professionals have been murdered. Many of the rest have fled.

The problems facing Iraq's neighbours are daunting: during 2006, the quiet but constant stream of people leaving Iraq turned into a steady torrent, with tens of thousands per month crossing the borders into Syria and Jordan.

By early 2007, two million Iraqis on top of some four million long-term Palestinian refugees had made the Middle East easily the biggest refugee-hosting region in the world. Add in the nearly 2 million displaced people inside Iraq, and the problem becomes gigantic.

For this reason, the UN refugee agency and others began to speak out with increasing urgency during the latter part of 2006: Jordan, Syria and the other countries in the region need help and they need it fast. The Iraqi refugees are rapidly plunging deeper into poverty and despair. The pressures are building inexorably across the board.

A huge international effort is required to focus on these problems, and for that reason, after talks with the most affected countries, UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres convened a high-level conference in Geneva on 17-18 April. It is one of the most important humanitarian events that city has seen since the big conferences that galvanized attention on the Balkans in the 1990s – and a great deal depends on its outcome, and on whether the international community does indeed rally round as it has done in the past in times of major crises.

To end this editorial on a more upbeat note – and as a welcome reminder that all wars do, one day, come to an end, we would like to draw your attention to an uplifting story that emerged from the war and eventual peace in Sierra Leone. The extraordinary tale of the band known as the Refugee All Stars begins on page 25. It is a remarkable example of how determined people can, with a little help from benevolent outsiders, spin great success out of deepest adversity.



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Cover: Injured woman receives help from passer-by.

© REUTERS / M. AMEEN / IRQ•2006

Back cover: Iraqi refugee child in Jordan.

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Many of Iraq's two million refugees are living precariously in just two overburdened countries: Syria and Jordan.

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Statistics show how difficult it is for Iraqis to find protection in industrialized countries today.

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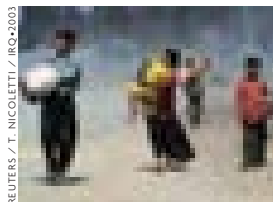
SHAME

The twice-displaced Palestinians in Iraq have no protectors, no papers, no country – and apparently no prospects.

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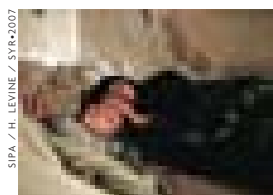
CINDERELLAS OF REGGAE

Take a talented refugee band, some vision, energy and a dose of good luck – and what do you get? The Refugee All Stars of Sierra Leone.



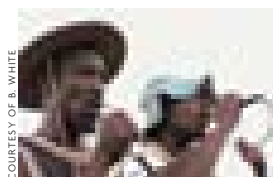
REUTERS / T. NICOLETTI / IRQ•2003

4 Some four million Iraqis have fled persecution, war and sectarian violence.



SIPA / H. LEVINE / SYR•2007

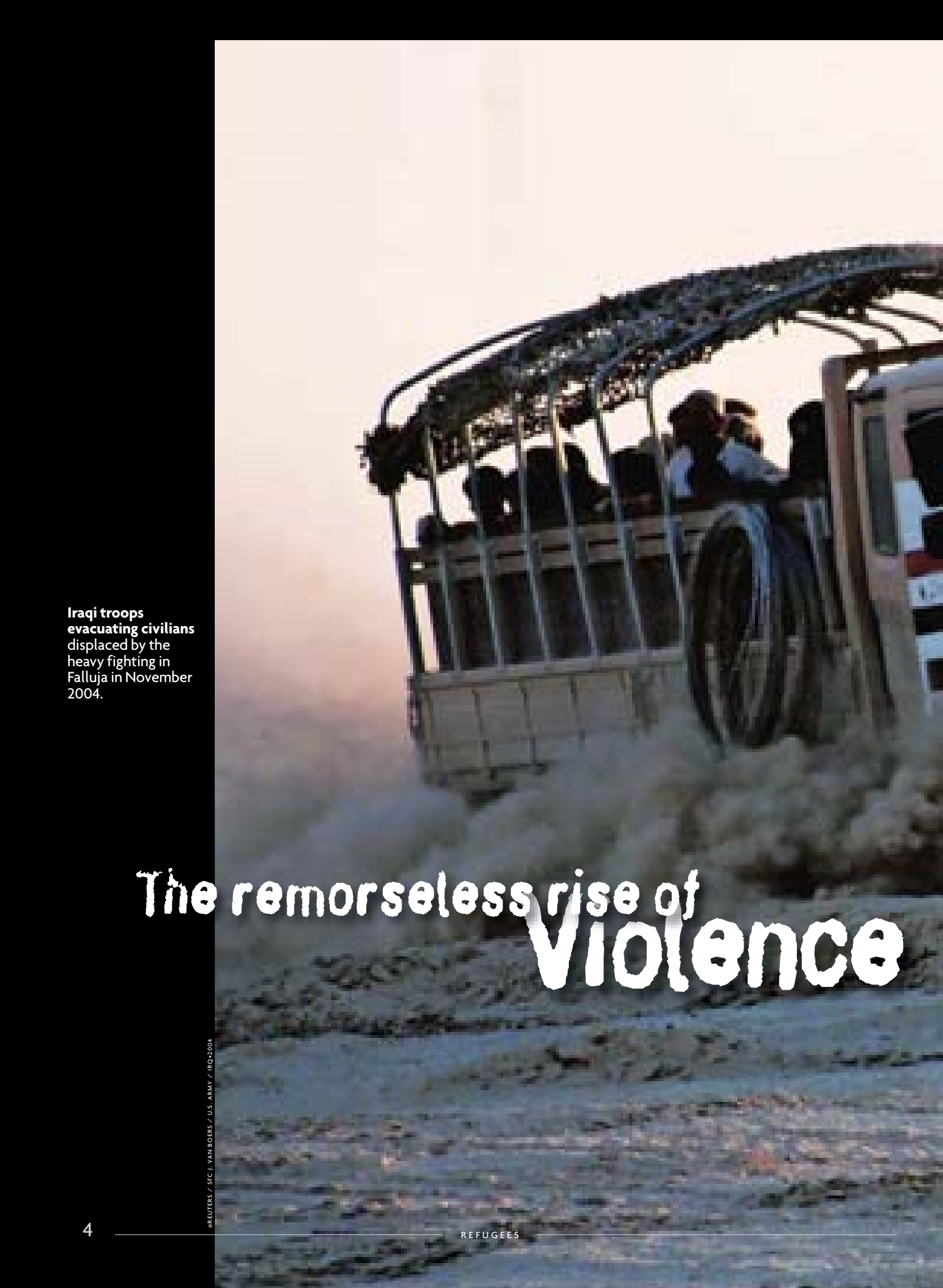
16 The huge majority remain in the immediate region, with few moving on elsewhere.



COURTESY OF B. WHITE

25 The amazing tale of some traumatized refugee musicians who hit the big time.

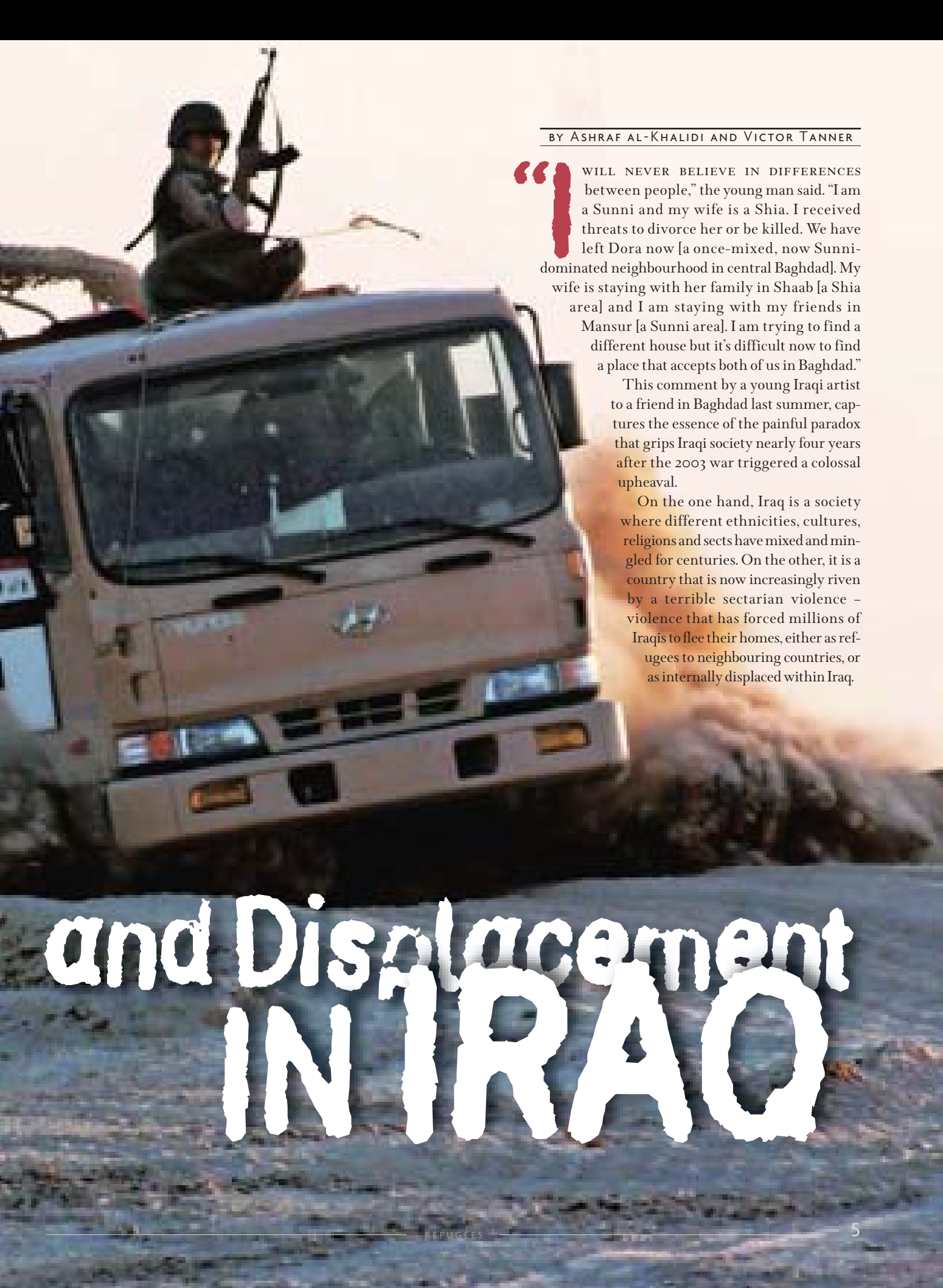
NOTE: WITH THE EXCEPTION OF MAJOR POLITICAL FIGURES, ALL NAMES OF IRAQIS USED IN THIS MAGAZINE HAVE BEEN CHANGED FOR PROTECTION REASONS – EVEN WHEN THEY DID NOT REQUEST ANONYMITY. SIMILARLY NO IRAQIS QUOTED IN ANY OF THE ARTICLES ARE FEATURED IN THE ACCOMPANYING PHOTOGRAPHS.



**Iraqi troops
evacuating civilians**
displaced by the
heavy fighting in
Falluja in November
2004.

The remorseless rise of Violence

©REUTERS / SFC J. VAN BOERS / U.S. ARMY / IRQ-2004



BY ASHRAF AL-KHALIDI AND VICTOR TANNER

“I WILL NEVER BELIEVE IN DIFFERENCES between people,” the young man said. “I am a Sunni and my wife is a Shia. I received threats to divorce her or be killed. We have left Dora now [a once-mixed, now Sunni-dominated neighbourhood in central Baghdad]. My wife is staying with her family in Shaab [a Shia area] and I am staying with my friends in Mansur [a Sunni area]. I am trying to find a different house but it’s difficult now to find a place that accepts both of us in Baghdad.”

This comment by a young Iraqi artist to a friend in Baghdad last summer, captures the essence of the painful paradox that grips Iraqi society nearly four years after the 2003 war triggered a colossal upheaval.

On the one hand, Iraq is a society where different ethnicities, cultures, religions and sects have mixed and mingled for centuries. On the other, it is a country that is now increasingly riven by a terrible sectarian violence – violence that has forced millions of Iraqis to flee their homes, either as refugees to neighbouring countries, or as internally displaced within Iraq.

and Displacement IN IRAQ

Qais & Layla

COLLECTED BY RUPERT COLVILLE

"I was kidnapped in the garage and my wife saw me from the window," says the husband, after picking the pseudonym Qais, while his wife settles for Layla (the Middle Eastern equivalent of Romeo and Juliet). "She was so scared, she collapsed. She was pregnant and I thought the shock would cause her to have a miscarriage. They covered my face and took me in a car somewhere far away."

Both Qais (a computer engineer) and Layla (a trained translator) are 30 years old. They met when she began translating documents for his company – and married on 25 December 2002, three months before the start of the Iraq war.

Qais is Sunni. Layla is a Kurdish Shia. It seems strange now, but at that time – just four years ago – their religious identities were not considered important.

"Both my parents are Shia, but it wasn't a problem," said Layla, during a recent interview in the Syrian capital Damascus.

"Mixed marriage was very common in Iraq between Sunnis, Shia and Christians," explained her husband. "My mother is Shia and my father is Sunni, and we lived in a mixed Sunni-Shia neighbourhood. The stratification of society into religious sects was not part of our society."

The first year after the war was "OK", said Layla "but after that it became like hell. The neighbourhood where we used to live has been taken over by Shia – it is one kilometre from Sadr City. Sunnis and Shia have exchanged apartments and now you do not see a Sunni living in a Shia neighbourhood, or a Shia living in a Sunni neighbourhood."

They received their first threats in March 2004: "They started calling me on the phone and threatening my family with provocative and scary messages such as 'We will take your wife away,' or 'We will make you divorce

her," said Qais. "I didn't know whether it was a Sunni upset because I had married a Shia, or vice versa.

"After the war, a mixed marriage became inconceivable. Everyone was suddenly saying to my in-laws: 'How dare you let your daughter marry and live with a Sunni?' One day we woke up to find graffiti on our house saying 'Their blood is wanted.'"

They stayed on too long, and on 20 May 2004 Qais was bundled into a car by four men and driven away. He was lucky. Many people taken away like this are found tortured and dead a few days or weeks later, but his kidnappers were at the criminal end of the spectrum – people more interested in money than in settling religious scores. In fact, despite remaining their captive for 16 days, he never actually found out whether they were Sunni or Shia.

"They scared me, but I was not tortured. My family had to pay US\$25,000 for my release."

After they let him go, Qais and Layla fled to Serbia, where an uncle of Qais has lived for 28 years. While they were there, Layla gave birth to a daughter, who almost ended up stateless because there was no Iraqi embassy to register her. In the end, lack of money drove them back to Syria, where they are not allowed to work and depend on Qais's parents' pension to survive.

"I had a dream, built a house, had a career and opened a private firm and now all this is gone," said Qais. "With all this sectarian tension, I worry that my wife's family will pressure her to leave me."

Return is unthinkable. "If we go back," said Layla "we would have to go through both Sunni and Shia areas. You don't know who will catch you – whether a Sunni group will catch us because of me, or a Shia group will catch us because of my husband."

She looks down at the ground: "Suddenly you have no life."

The violence gives the

A HISTORY OF LIVING SIDE BY SIDE

LIVING TOGETHER IS A NATURAL PART OF LIFE in Iraq. The Mesopotamian plain is a historical melting pot. Modern Iraq reflects this. The three great cities – Baghdad, Basra and Mosul – have been cosmopolitan centers of commerce and learning for centuries. There may not be any official statistics, but there are large numbers of mixed marriages in Iraq – some say up to a third of all marriages. Indeed many of the country's tribes – including some of the most powerful ones – consist of both Sunni and Shia.

True, the regime of Saddam Hussein played on differences between Shia and Sunnis, as well as between Arabs and Kurds, aggravating the tensions that exist in any multicultural society. But when in 2003 the horrors of that regime were swept aside, many Iraqis yearned for a normal life: security, due process and the rule of law. This was especially true of Shia communities, which had suffered so much under Saddam.

Even today, many ordinary people still do not think in terms of civil war. What they see is not neighbour against neighbour, but armed thugs on all sides brutalizing civilians.

People have tried to protect their friends and neighbours. Shia displaced from Mosul and Falluja, interviewed in Diwaniya in June 2006, told of Sunni families who had sought to protect them, and who had in turn been targeted by Sunni radicals.

Similar stories came from the other side: we heard, for example, from residents of the Hayy al-Jaamia area of Baghdad about an incident in which a local Sunni grocer was killed by Shia thugs, and when his Shia neighbour protested, he, too, was murdered.

But the situation is hardening. Violence is reaching deeper into society. More and more ordinary people have ties to the radical groups. In many neighbourhoods, it is a case of being either with them or against them. And if the latter, the consequence is to flee or, often, to be killed. And once kin

About the authors: ASHRAF AL-KHALIDI (a Baghdad-based Iraqi researcher who writes under a pseudonym) and VICTOR TANNER were co-authors of a report entitled 'Sectarian Violence: Radical Groups Drive Internal Displacement in Iraq', published by the Brookings Institution-University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement, in October 2006.

radical groups their raison d'être. They use the displaced as pawns to further their agendas.

and loved ones join a radical group, the whole family is entrapped.

THE HARD-LINERS

SINCE THE BOMBING OF THE HOLY SHIA SHRINE in Samarra's Golden Mosque in February 2006, successive waves of attack and retaliation have washed over the country. The Samarra bombing marked the end of the restraint with which Shia had faced escalating attacks against them. Now the violence is from both sides. The weapon of choice of Sunni militant groups is the car-bomb, while extremist Shia death squads detain, torture and murder people.

The violence is neither spontaneous nor popular. Whether you ask political actors or ordinary Iraqis in the street, including those displaced by the violence, the view is that more extreme religious fronts drive both the violence and the resulting displacement.

Hard-line leaders on both sides view the violence and displacement as an extension of existing historical trends. Shia leaders point to a history of anti-Shia repression by Sunni leaders in Iraq. "The Shia are being killed since the death of the Prophet. In fact we can't see any difference between the Umayyads [an early Arab dynasty that consolidated Sunni dominance in the Muslim territories] and Saddam or the current radical Sunni leaders," said an official of one of the Shia political parties, interviewed in Najaf. Similarly, another official



from a different Shia group in the Baghdad neighbourhood of Shuala declared: "The plan is clear to us. They want to eliminate the Shia in Baghdad and Diyala so they can establish their Taliban state in the Sunni areas."

For hard-line Sunnis, the very essence of the situation is sectarian: they see the 'new' Iraq as a creation of US and Iranian interests – a place where

The bombs that demolished the revered shrine at Samarra caused no direct casualties, but sparked a sharp increase in sectarian violence that has killed thousands.



UNHCR / SATELLITE IMAGE MAP © 1996-2004 PLANETARY VISIONS

Sectarian violence is not the only cause of displacement. Others include the lack of security and basic services, property disputes, and military operations that periodically displace thousands of civilians.

REFUGEE TESTIMONIES

Amina

“My husband was an officer in the old army. After the invasion, some militia started sending threats.” Some men tried to capture their 10-year-old son at his school. The school guard intervened, and was shot dead.

“After that, we moved to Falluja, but our history followed us. A list came out with the names of everyone who had been in the army. We left everything and came to Jordan at the beginning of 2005. At that time there was no problem getting into Jordan.

“My husband wasn’t able to work – so he went back to Iraq to try to earn some money. He was there for 15 days. I don’t know what happened but he told me on the phone that he wanted to come back to Jordan.

Between Abu Ghreib and Ramadi there were men at a checkpoint – they looked like government forces, but we were told later it was the [Mahdi] Army. They asked to see his ID card, then took him away.

“I’ve had no news from him now for fourteen months. I’m living on my own with five children. I have no income.

“When I went to the Ministry of the Interior building to extend my visa, I saw a woman I knew from Iraq. I gave her my cell phone number. Later, a man called me on the cell

phone. He said ‘I want to hand you a letter from your husband. He’s alive.’ I said ‘I can’t come and get the letter now. It’s night time. Can I send someone?’ He said ‘Bring your son and come.’ We arranged to meet in the place where the buses leave for Iraq. I waited there 45 minutes. Then I got another phone call, and the same man said ‘You think that just because you left Iraq, you are safe?’ I was shaking. I took my son and went back home.

“Life has gone back to what it was. I can’t really support my children any more. When someone knocks at the door, I’m afraid. I have an arrangement with a neighbour. If I ring once and put down the phone, she comes to check.”

In early 2006, her two-year-old daughter began collapsing on a regular basis, and was subsequently found to be suffering from cancer of the kidney. The NGO Caritas helped Amina with the medical bills. One kidney was totally destroyed, so they removed it.

Now three years old, she is still under observation. In December, she collapsed again. “I don’t have money for continued medical care...” said her mother, tears streaming down her face. “I don’t know what to do.”

Sunnis no longer belong. “The plan for Southern Federalism [...] allows the Shia political coalition to control the oil in the South and leaves the Sunnis isolated and poor,” said an official of a Sunni political party in Mosul. For another Sunni party official in Baghdad, the anti-Sunni attacks are “an organized plan against the Sunni Arabs... This has led us to question who is really responsible for the Samarra bombing,” he added – a fine example of how, in times of extreme violence, a blend of paranoia and bad faith can replace rational discourse.

The violence gives the radical groups their *raison d’être*. The displaced are pawns they use to further their agendas – which are strikingly similar. They seek to consolidate ‘their’ territory by expelling the ‘others.’ They try to keep some of ‘their’ people in the territory of the ‘other’ so as to maintain a claim on the local resources. In a context where the central government is facing immense difficulties asserting its authority across the country, the radical groups of all sides are able to pose as both protectors and providers to the most vulnerable. The displaced are also pawns in the internecine struggles between different groups within each of the two main communities.

As the power and influence of the radical groups increase, so too does their tendency to engage in repressive behaviour. In Sadr City, residents say they feel relief when the Shia militia known as the Mahdi Army engages in operations outside the area, because when they are not busy elsewhere, they harass people in their own area. In Washash, a formerly mixed area now under Shia control, Shia households must fly a black flag to demonstrate fealty.

Likewise, in Baghdad’s Sunni neighbourhoods of Dora, Ghaziliya and al-Khadhra, the Omar Brigades enforce strict Sharia law in a fashion reminiscent of the Taliban. Smoking is prohibited. Women are forbidden from wearing trousers, and men from shaving. Penalties for transgressors are brutal – and sometimes final. It is, on both sides, typical warlord politics: moderates and people who speak up in opposition to the violence are targeted, intimidated and killed. The only guarantee for survival is silence.

MODERATION IN DECLINE

ANOTHER OMINOUS AND UGLY DEVELOPMENT is that these views are bleeding into the general public. The inhuman nature of the violence, its



AFP / M. MOHAMMED / IRQ-2004

Heavily armed militias operate on both sides of the sectarian divide.

pervasiveness, are causing intolerance and mistrust to spread, especially among the youth.

There are few voices of moderation in Iraq today. One of the few national leaders to have spoken out against the violence and specifically against displacement is Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. In July 2006, he condemned “sectarian chaos” (*fitna taafiyya*), the “mutual violence” (*onf mutaqaabil*) and “campaigns of forced displacement” (*hamlaat at-tahjiir al-qasri*). But, to the despair of many moderate Shia (and Iraqis in general), the influence of moderates seems to be waning as that of radical Shia groups and younger, hard-line leaders grows.

In response to the violence, many local communities, on both sides, are setting up vigilante-like defense committees to protect their areas. But they do not have resources: weapons, generators, fuel, and so on. So, in order to function, they link themselves to the bigger groups like the Shia Mahdi Army, or the Sunni Omar Brigades. This only fuels the problem further, as the radical groups gain in power at the local level.

Adding to the grim picture, tribes on both sides – which were initially playing a stabilizing counterpoint to the urban violence, especially in rural areas – seem to be growing restless. If open conflict erupts between tribal groups, the violence will take on an organized, popular and rural dimension that has so far, mercifully, been lacking.

DISPLACEMENT ON THE RISE

WELL BEFORE THE 2003 CONFLICT, VIOLENT displacement was a major feature of the Iraq of Saddam Hussein. Today’s radical groups continue in that vein: using the violent ejection of entire

Threatening letters have become a deliberate weapon of displacement. This one concludes with the statement: “We give you 48 hours to leave this area... Remember 48 hours only from the time you receive this paper – and then death.”



AP / S. MIZBAN / IRQ-2006

populations as a tool to assert political power. The central pattern of displacement is the consolidation of territory by the radical armed groups. In essence, people flee to areas where they feel safer. Sunnis go to Sunni areas. Shia go to Shia areas. Kurds – and some Arabs – go to the northern provinces and Christians go to parts of Ninewah province. And most of those who can leave the country, do so. The result: the radical groups hold sway over ‘cleansed’ territories, and have steadily increased their power.

Patterns of displacement vary. The more mixed a city is, the more sectarian violence there is likely to be. Places such as north Babil, Salah ad-Din

province, Mosul, Basra and especially Baghdad have been exceptionally violent. In these areas, campaigns to undermine mixed neighbourhoods proceed in parallel. There tends to be less violence in areas where there is a functioning local authority – mainly the Kurdish North and the southern Shia towns (other than Basra).

The number of displaced is hard to estimate. The only official numbers come from the Ministry of Trade, which manages the country’s rations, but they may underestimate the overall problem. Many displaced people do not register for rations, and all numbers for internally displaced people in Iraq are manipulated, especially those put out by the political parties. The generally accepted figure for the number of people displaced within Iraq in the year following the Samarra bombing is over 700,000. And, by March 2007, UNHCR was estimating that up to two million Iraqi refugees were living in neighbouring countries, especially Jordan and Syria.

Sectarian violence is not the only cause of displacement. Others include the lack of security and basic services, delays in the resolution of property disputes, as well as the military operations that periodically displace thousands of civilians.

There are different categories of sectarian displaced. Sunni Arabs from majority Shia areas are the group that has grown most dramatically since the Samarra bombing. Shia from majority Sunni areas have also been under immense pressure. Many Sunni and Shia Arabs whom the Baath regime settled, often forcibly, in the mainly Kurdish North as part of its aggressive Arabization program were forced to leave in 2003 and 2004.

Minority groups forced to flee from both Sunni and Shia areas include Kurds, Christians, Turkmen, Sabean-Mandeans, Roma and third-country nationals, especially Palestinians [see article on page 24]. The minorities are often prey to criminal gangs rather than sectarian ones, because they are viewed as having little in the way of protection, unlike the Sunnis, Kurds and Shia.

HOW DO PEOPLE COPE?

THE MAJORITY OF THE DISPLACED STAY WITH family, friends or simply people from the same community. Others squat in public buildings. There are far fewer displaced in camps than with host families. People in camps are the worst off because of poor shelter and sanitation conditions. For the most part, families seem to have stayed together, but an important social impact of displacement is increased child labour.

To obtain a ration, displaced people must register with the Ministry of Trade. For a number of reasons

REFUGEE TESTIMONIES

Nada

“People are being killed because of their identity card. If I’m stopped at a checkpoint in Baghdad, the name Nada doesn’t reveal that I am Shia. But the card shows my father’s name and that is clearly Shia, so at some checkpoints I would be killed.

“One week ago, some young [Shia] men here... the police came to their apartment. They took them to a police station. Then they took them to the border with Iraq. There are drivers on the other side of the border. The young men spoke to a driver and told him they didn’t have any money and asked him to take them to Baghdad. We think that the driver is getting paid US\$100 for each Shia that he delivers to the terrorist groups. Six of them were beheaded. One of those men was my cousin.”

“Here in Jordan, the Iraqis stick together – whether Sunni, Shia, Christian. But in Iraq, they are killing each other.”

After talking for half an hour, mainly about her difficult life in Jordan, Nada suddenly breaks down. Her friends try to console her, and after she has nodded her permission,

tell the rest of her story on her behalf: her husband was kidnapped in Kirkuk in November 2006. There has been no news of him since. She has five children – the eldest, a daughter, is 19; the youngest, also a daughter, is eight.

The children do not know that their father has been kidnapped – and do not understand why he is failing to telephone. She tells them he is travelling, but after three months the story is wearing thin.

Nada’s two sons, aged 17 and 15, both work illegally in a shoe factory in Jordan after school. The family lives off their income. “Basically, my children are all that I have left,” she says, wiping away the tears. “My oldest son is determined to go to Iraq to find him, though he doesn’t know he has been kidnapped. I’m worried about my son – he’s started smoking and his friends want to take him out to a night club. I worry that if he starts smoking, going to clubs and drinking alcohol, I’ll lose control and my younger son will follow suit. Then the money will be spent and the family will fall apart.”



Relatively few of Iraq's 1.9 million internally displaced people live in camps. The majority of the displaced stay with family, friends or simply people from the same community. Others squat in public buildings.

– lack of documentation, insecurity, lack of trust, pride – many displaced apparently do not register. This holds especially true of people who can avoid the camps because they have relatives they can stay with or simply because they can afford to live without help.

The difficult living conditions trigger much anger against the government. Local authorities are acutely aware of this. Local authorities at the provincial and district level are relatively effective. Every province has a displaced committee and an operations room.

The Iraqi Red Crescent is the primary national aid agency dealing with the displaced. They work mostly in the camps and collective settlements – the only non-sectarian group with real structures

and a countrywide presence. Local communities sometimes also support the displaced through informal committees in neighbourhoods and local mosques. International assistance, has in recent times been minimal, and also not very visible, because of the security situation.

DIM PROSPECTS

IT IS HARD TO GRASP THE IMPACT OF THE SECTARIAN violence. Neighbourhoods that were once hard to tell apart are now separated by a no man's land of deserted streets and shuttered buildings. Transporters must change lorries and drivers to ferry goods from territory to territory. Roads are closed to one group or another. Worst of all, Iraq's educated elites are fleeing the country – many have given

up hope and are seeking resettlement in third countries.

Though it seems unthinkable, many people fear that the sectarian violence may get even worse. A recent report by the International Medical Corps raises the spectre of “the use of heavier artillery and weaponry to target segregated areas, as well as... widespread sectarian cleansing.” The radical groups, while becoming more violent, may also be fragmenting, making it even harder to find a political solution.

At the time this magazine went to press, the outcome of the government’s Security Plan and the US surge was still not clear. But few of those interviewed were very optimistic. A young Sunni man from the Shia neighbourhood of Shaab told us that the Mahdi Army had made itself scarce of late, but “we know they will be back.” Across the country, displaced people, Sunni and Shia, say that sectarian displacement is on the rise, and chances of returning home are – for the foreseeable future – slim. “The Government wants us to go back to our houses in Baghdad,” one man said. “I called my Sunni neighbours and they told me the insurgents are still using our house for their operations. How can we go back?”

REFUGEE TESTIMONIES

Hussam

Hussam is Sunni, his wife Amira is Shia. Once upon a time, they owned a sewing factory near Basra, with 13 employees.

Hussam pulls a slightly dog-eared photocopy of a letter out of his wallet and carefully unfolds it.

Letter of 20 February 2006

To whom it may concern

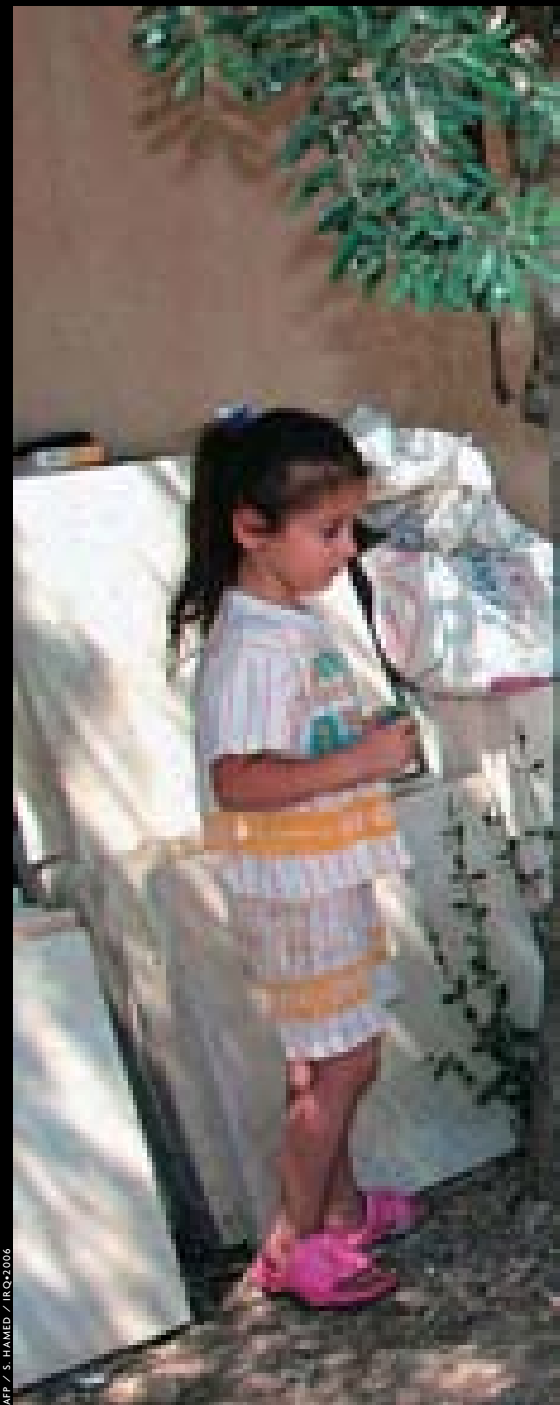
We would like to inform you that it has been proven that Hussam XXX has worked for the past regime and that is why we would like to request his address and exact whereabouts and warn you not to hide any information for the benefit of the public.

The letter was fixed to the car

windscreen of one of Hussam’s brothers. Another brother was shot in the head in April 2006.

Hussam believes his brother was killed because of him: because he was making clothes for senior officials and army officers, and because his niece was married to an army captain. So he is indelibly associated with the former regime. “If you were living at that time and the government asked you to make uniforms, you didn’t say no,” he remarks.

Later in 2006, he says he received a call on his cell phone in his asylum country. “They said ‘We killed your brother, and you’re next. No matter what country you go to, we will find you.’”



AFP / S. HAMED / IRQ 2006

Iraq's minorities are

People are beginning to integrate the violence into how they live. Fear now dictates which market you shop at; where you go to hospital – or even whether you go at all; whether you send your kids to school; what passenger you take in your taxi, and where you are willing to take him; which friends you see...

There is a new job in Baghdad today. For a fee, certain people will scour dumps and river banks to



easy prey for extortionists and extremists.

find the body of your missing loved one. How long can people live with such violence and not be permanently scarred?

"I wish they would attack us with a nuclear bomb and kill us all, so we will rest..." an Iraqi said to a New York Times reporter, after a 3 February bomb in a Baghdad market that killed over 130 people, and wounded more than 300 others, "We cannot live this

way anymore. We are dying slowly every day."

Increasingly, displaced people see what happened to them as a reflection of deep-seated political divisions in the country. The violence is causing lasting change to Iraq's social and demographic make-up. That is what the radical armed groups on both sides seek to achieve.

They are succeeding. ■

A family from one of Iraq's religious minorities who fled Baghdad to live in a cemetery in northern Iraq.

Difficult Delivery

The 'remote management' of aid in Iraq.

BY CÉCILE POUILLY

CANAL HOTEL, 19 AUGUST 2003, 16:30 hrs.: a truck packed with explosives smashes through the wire fence surrounding the UN headquarters in Baghdad and explodes, killing 23 people, including the UN Special Representative in Iraq. Dozens more are seriously wounded during the attack.

Two months later, on the first day of Ramadan, the International Committee of the Red Cross delegation in Baghdad is struck by a car bomb – the first attack of this type on the ICRC since its creation in 1863. Thirty-five die and 230 are injured as a result of this explosion and three others that take place in the Iraqi capital over the next 45 minutes.

These assaults – as well as the kidnapping of two Italian female aid workers and the assassination of CARE's representative Margaret Hassan in September and November 2004 – stunned the entire humanitarian community.

"In Iraq, there's no longer any room for neutrality," said Pierre Gassmann, former ICRC head of delegation for Iraq in 2003–2004 and Advisor to the Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research at Harvard University. "In situations this polarized, the biggest threat to the security of international organizations is the belief that they are perceived to be neutral. They are not."

His views are supported by some stark statistics: according to the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (or NCCI, an umbrella organization based in Amman representing close to 300 international and local NGOs), at least 82 Iraqi and international aid workers were killed in Iraq between 2003 and January 2007. Another 86 were kidnapped, 245 injured and 24 arrested.

These targeted attacks have almost

certainly permanently affected the way humanitarian agencies operate in conflict zones. By the end of 2003, virtually all international organizations had withdrawn their expatriate staff from Iraq, either stopping their activities altogether or adopting a new way of working.

NEW MODUS OPERANDI

WHILE MANY AGENCIES CONTINUED to function in the north, most have relocated their international staff based in central and southern Iraq to neighbouring countries, while limited activities continued to be carried out on the ground by local Iraqi staff.

Initially, relief agencies tended to choose the "remote control" option, under which decision-making remained the prerogative of the evacuated international staff. But the limitations of this method quickly became apparent. As a result, most agencies shifted – to varying degrees – from 'remote control' to 'remote management'.

Pierre Gassmann explains: "Many international organizations... realized that if they wished to stay involved in a situation such as Iraq, they had to do the work with national staff – to pick quality staff, whom they could entrust with broader responsibilities."

An increasing reliance on local NGOs became another major feature of humanitarian interventions in Iraq, especially in the extremely dangerous central part of the country. There are very few foreign NGOs still working in the central area.

The Iraqi Red Crescent Society (IRCS), through its 18 branches and extensive network of volunteers, is the only agency able to openly operate nation-wide. But even IRCS is not immune to the anarchy that plagues Iraq today: on 17 December, 30 of its staff were kidnapped from one of its Baghdad offices, and 13 of them were still missing in mid-March.

"But there are places you can work – do

community-based work," said NCCI's Cedric Turlan. "More and more, you can work in your own community, but not anywhere else." He is somewhat heartened by the recent shift of focus by UNHCR and the rest of the UN in Iraq. "For months we felt alone in focusing on the inside – now, with the UN, it seems there is a wish to change – and movement to change."

Andrew Harper, head of UNHCR's Iraq Support Unit, agreed that new approaches are necessary to alleviate the plight of people inside the country. "Our operations must be pragmatic," he said. "This may require an increasing reliance on money changers, cross-border operations, working with non-state actors and moving the focus of interventions away from Baghdad to areas where we have access and can operate."

THE ONLY OPTION

THIS TYPE OF APPROACH HAS ALLOWED agencies to avoid a complete disruption of operations and may be the only way they could function in the current climate.

"Remote management is not an option. It's a one-way street," said one of the UN refugee agency's Iraqi staff. "We don't have other options to choose from."

As of early March, UNHCR had eleven partners carrying out protection and assistance programmes on its behalf inside Iraq, including distribution of non-food items, providing emergency shelter and running legal aid and information centres.

While monitoring activities are carried out by UNHCR national staff, according to a monthly plan approved by the agency's offices in Kuwait and Amman, daily contact with international colleagues is mostly maintained through emails and phone calls.

"What's the point of going to Baghdad?" asks a European NGO programme manager whose agency works with UNHCR in Central Iraq. "You risk your safety and that of your staff, because they have to look after you. And if your operations are in the



CORBIS / S. SINCLAIR / IRQ21003

Rescuers searching for survivors, after the UN Headquarters in Iraq was blown up on 19 August 2003.

field, it is no help going to the Green Zone. And asking your staff to come to the Green Zone can put them at risk.”

It is the same in the south: “I don’t see any value to have international staff in Basra at the moment,” says an Iraqi aid worker from that city. “They would be either located in the international airport or at the palace where the American consulate is and both these places are not safe for us to go.”

But the transfer of responsibility also implies a transfer of vulnerability: “Iraqi aid workers are taking incredible risks,” said NCCI’s Cedric Turlan. “In the central area, just living there is a risk. But aid workers are more at risk: they are going out when others stay in.”

Nevertheless, the NGO working with UNHCR in Central Iraq is still able to deliver on activities that strengthen local capacity to absorb and protect people of concern. It is also drilling much needed bore-holes, and carrying out rehabilitation and income generation projects that benefit displaced people and host populations alike.

Some staff have been threatened,

according to its programme manager. “You receive a warning from somebody. If you’re lucky, you receive a second warning.” One of his staff working with internally displaced people was forced to leave the area, and became a displaced person himself.

The flip side of the security situation is that, in some cases, the lack of information available to external managers making security decisions may result in too much caution. “The UN security rules should be more flexible so we can move, as Iraqis living in Iraq,” says the UNHCR staffer in the south. “I will assess if it’s OK for me to go or not and I will not take unnecessary risks... but these people are our cousins, our relatives – we have to do something.”

MUTUAL MONITORING

SINCE OVERNIGHT MISSIONS ARE NOT allowed, it is practically impossible for UNHCR staff to monitor programmes performed by implementing partners in some of the nine southern governorates such as Kut and Missan, which leads to a second issue: accountability. How can you track what is going on from abroad?

“It’s not perfect at all but it’s better than nothing”, says Cedric Turlan of NCCI. “The delivering is not remote – it is the managing.”

Janvier de Riedmatten, UNHCR Representative to Iraq (who is based in Jordan), notes that various options are being explored to boost monitoring: “Most of our implementing partners have strong Iraqi staff, who were trained before the war. Therefore, we generally trust what they are doing. And we can monitor a fair number of activities through our own Iraqi colleagues. Nevertheless, we are now developing an additional system of ‘peer monitoring’ which will help NGOs to monitor each other.”

Everyone agrees on a key point: in order to avoid continued displacement inside and out of Iraq, the needs of Iraq’s general population – both those still in their own homes and those who have been internally displaced – must be addressed quickly. To do so, humanitarian workers may have to operate at an elevated risk level, until politicians deliver on their duty to do their utmost toward restoration of a safe humanitarian space. ■

Some two million Iraqi refugees are believed to have scattered across the Middle East – the biggest refugee movement in the region since the exodus of Palestinians following the creation of Israel in 1948.

BY RUPERT COLVILLE

SYRIA

THE SCENE: A SMALL INTERIOR courtyard at a refugee centre in the Syrian capital, Damascus in early February. Around 50 adult refugees sit on fold-down chairs, with an anxious, expectant air. Most of them are holding sheafs of paper – their documents: precious evidence of past lives, and of their present diminished circumstances.

A UN refugee agency official sits down at a trestle table in front of them. A middle-aged woman, wearing a large brace along the entire length of one arm, stands up and the information session begins.

She describes how her husband was kidnapped on 11 September 2006 on his way to work in Baghdad. She hasn't seen him since. His driver was found dead. Later, some men came to her house and broke her arms.

Can UNHCR do anything to help trace her husband? She is referred to the International Committee of the Red Cross which traditionally handles tracing – but she has seen them already.

Another woman stands up: her health is bad. The UNHCR staff member refers

her to a clinic which is treating Iraqis free of charge.

Then he faces a barrage of questions about residence permits. The rules have changed again. Now they are granted for 15 days, then extended for a maximum of three months. The UN official explains that UNHCR is still trying to get clarification about the new rules (a few days later they are considerably relaxed) and tries to reassure his audience that, as far as UNHCR is aware, no one is being deported.

There are some dissenting voices in the crowd. People have heard things: one man claims his sons were deported, another mentions a family which has been detained. The UNHCR staffer takes down the details.

A man complains his two daughters have broken bones. He doesn't explain how that came about. "Now they're telling us to go to the borders to renew our visas. How can I do that with broken bones?"

And what about the new registration exercise UNHCR began two days earlier in its main office in Damascus? (The agency was almost overrun as 5,000 turned up on each of the first two days, to receive application forms and schedule appointments for the full registration).

What is the registration for? Are the bits of paper worth anything? Will they give people a bit more protection?

The UNHCR staffer announces that the agency has established three hotlines: people can now call in with their queries

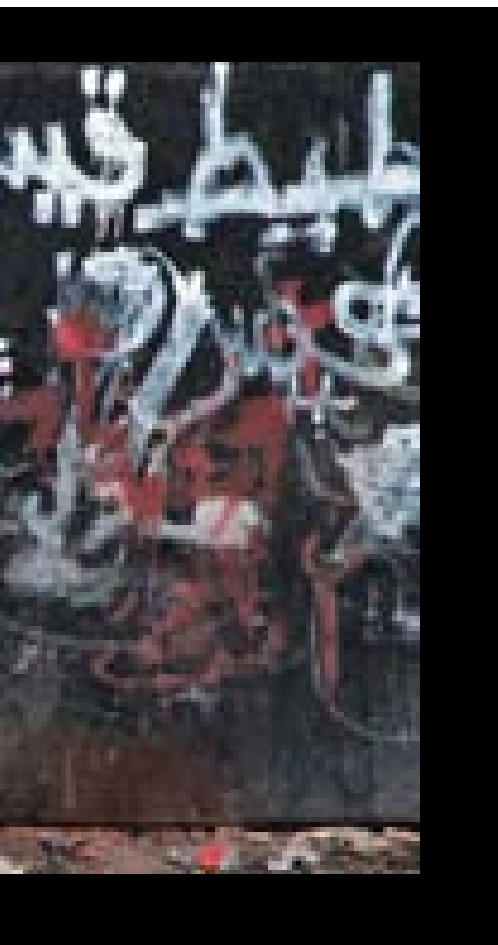
Regional

Thousands of Iraqi refugees have congregated in the Sayda Zeinab district of Damascus, as well as in various other poor neighbourhoods in the Syrian and Jordanian capitals.



UNHCR / J. WREFOED / SYR-2007

Perspectives



(a month later, at least 100 calls are being handled by the hotlines each day).

Lots of questions about resettlement to other countries. The UNHCR staff member explains that there are very few places, only the most vulnerable have a chance. The words bring little comfort – almost everyone who has spoken up so far seems vulnerable. The US has just announced it will take 7,000 more Iraqis from the region. The discussion whirls furiously round the subject of resettlement. Some become very animated, others visibly sink further into depression.

“Now all doors are closed in our face,” says one man. His tone is flat, but edged with despair.

Simultaneously, elsewhere in some of

the more run-down parts of this beautiful, ancient city, other UNHCR staff hold similar sessions, and a few thousand more file through the agency’s main office, putting down their names so that they can come back at a later date for a full registration.

JORDAN

OUT TO THE JORDANIAN CAPITAL, Amman, some 200 kilometres to the south, where UNHCR staff hold a small informal meeting with a group of ten Iraqi intellectuals, writers and artists in a downtown café. Jordan has around 1,000 officially recognized refugees (as well as anything between half a million and a million other Iraqis – many of whom came before 2003). Several of the recognized refugees are in the café, and they are angry with UNHCR.

They are the people who fell through the gap: they arrived in Jordan fleeing Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, and in due course would probably have been resettled to another country. However, after Saddam was toppled by the 2003 war, resettlement of Iraqis ground to a halt everywhere.

Technically the underlying grounds for resettlement – the consequences of persecution by the Saddam Hussein regime – had disappeared. Now, they need to prove continued vulnerability in an entirely different environment filled with thousands of others who may be equally or more vulnerable and – as ever – competing for a limited number of places.

Resettlement has only started to ramp up again in 2007, and the available places – and resources to cope with large numbers of referrals – are lagging far behind the needs. UNHCR plans to make 20,000 resettlement referrals before the end of the year – but even if governments accept all those and more, it will only amount to a small fraction of the total number of refugees in the region. The pre-war

refugees are alarmed that now, with so many extremely vulnerable new arrivals, they will miss out again.

“The refugees are understandably confused,” said Hanan Hamdan, a UNHCR Protection Officer in Amman.

“Expectations are high and the frustrations are high as well.” The agency is carrying out its resettlement processing on twin tracks, so neither the ‘old’ nor the ‘new’ refugees miss out entirely.



Huge numbers of Iraqi children may be traumatized as a result of witnessing violence. These boys were displaced during the battle for Falluja in November 2004.

EGYPT

EVEN IF CAIRO HAS A POPULATION that is, according to some estimates, three times that of the whole of Jordan, 100,000 Iraqis is a lot of people for any city to absorb. Many of those who arrived after 2003 have gravitated towards one of Cairo’s new outlying developments, 6th October City, where – with exceptions – they seem to be getting by.

“Many of the Iraqis that we see on a daily basis are very well educated and highly skilled. They have settled down

successfully and some have started small businesses,” said Arushi Ray, a UNHCR Community Services Officer.

Despite a crowded job market, the more resourceful Iraqis continue to find opportunities: “Once we arrived in Egypt we decided to use [our] limited resources to open this modest business,” said an Iraqi baker – who used to be an engineer in Baghdad. “We’re barely getting by – but we

are supporting our families and can afford to send our children to school.”

FEAR AND IMPOVERISHMENT

EVERYWHERE YOU LOOK IN SYRIA AND Jordan you find impoverished Iraqi mothers, with dead or missing husbands, traumatized children, people in need of major surgery, people at risk from cross-border vendettas, and people who – if they

were sent back (both governments insist they are not deporting Iraqis) – would clearly be at great risk.

Many refugees are in a nebulous situation – by and large tolerated, but without a legal basis for their presence in the neighbouring countries. Many visas have expired. New ones are hard to come by. In addition, the old Iraqi passports are due to become invalid by the summer of 2007, and the new ones are, for many people, likely to be difficult to obtain.

The refugees are constantly looking over their shoulders, disturbed by rumours that people are being picked up in vans and sent back. True or not, such stories cause intense anxiety.

Despite their fears, most Iraqis recognize their presence is causing difficulties for their hosts. “I am thankful for the government for allowing us to come,” said Nour, a 47-year-old mother of five with a missing husband. “And they have laws that we should respect and abide by. There is an Iraqi saying: if you are a stranger in someone’s home you must respect them, and if a stranger comes to your house, you must look after him for a week. What is it like to have thousands and thousands of strangers in your country for a long time?”

She spreads her palms: “We are realistic. Those of us who have been here since 2000 – we can’t go back to Iraq, and we can’t stay here much longer either. We need solutions. We have angered the Jordanian population because we have pushed up prices. If we ride in a taxi, we hear how we have pushed up the price of food, of houses – everything. Wherever we go, we hear how we have made life more difficult for the Jordanians.”

COLOSSAL STRAINS

“WE ARE BEING EXTREMELY accommodating, understanding and lenient,” said Government Spokesperson Nasser Judeh. “We take issue with reports that Jordan isn’t doing enough.”

And it is hard to disagree. If Jordan, a country with a population of 5.7 million, has 750,000 Iraqis on its territory (the early 2007 best guess), this would be the equivalent of just under 8 million refugees in France or the UK, 11 million in Germany and 40 million in the United States. In

REFUGEE TESTIMONIES

Haneen’s Story

Haneen is 42 years old and spent most of her career as a secretary for various Iraqi government institutions. Her husband was a diplomat. After the US army captured Baghdad, they were both removed from their posts. Despite his past, her husband worked for three months as an interpreter and guard for the US army. They needed the money, but now they were a target for the embittered on both sides of the political and sectarian divide.

Their house was bombed, and at the end of 2003 her husband was picked up by a militia and held for seven months, along with dozens of others. In the end, he was freed when the army approached the building where he was being held, and his guards melted away.

“My husband had a heart condition,” she said. “At first it was a simple problem. His medical situation got worse after the invasion and the kidnapping. He was deprived of the medicine he was supposed to take every day, and they kept him in the cold and without food for up to three days at a time.”

By the time they fled to Damascus at the end of 2004, his health had deteriorated. They arrived with US\$1,000. “At that time, prices hadn’t risen so much, so the money lasted seven months,” she said. However, by mid-2005, they were in trouble financially.

UNHCR arranged for her husband to

receive medicine, but did not have sufficient funds to pay for heart surgery. “We needed about US\$4,500 for the operation,” said Haneen. “But UNHCR could only offer US\$1,500.” She understands why, and does not appear to bear a grudge against the agency, even though her husband died from his heart condition in March 2006. (Lack of funding has forced medical agencies in Jordan to practise similar triage).

Two months after his death, she and her two sons aged 8 and 6 had to move out of their tiny apartment, because she could no longer pay the rent. Now she moves from host family to host family: “I stay five days, one week. My sons are becoming aggressive towards me, because I can’t buy them things and because we keep moving.”

She reels off a few other family tragedies as though there is nothing very unusual about them – which, in the context of Iraq, is unfortunately very much the case: “I have one brother who was killed in June 2006. Another of my brothers was kidnapped. I don’t know what has happened to him.” She also has five sisters: “I don’t know exactly where they are either. I’ve had no news for a long time.”

She gets on with life as best she can. She even helps UNHCR out a bit at a refugee centre, for no salary. And from time to time, she still raises a smile.



Some of the Iraqis who left in 2003-04 were relatively wealthy; but by 2007, most newcomers were poor and many of those who had come earlier had exhausted their savings.



general, both Syria and Jordan have shown a very tolerant attitude towards the Iraqis.

"Jordan's systems are under pressure..." said Judeh. "Refugees coming into Jordan don't carry a bucket of water when they arrive. We are one of the ten poorest countries, in terms of water resources, in the world."

In addition, Jordan already has a very large population – close to half the total – of Palestinian refugees, whose original camps have turned into sprawling suburbs around Amman and other Jordanian cities. Many have permanent residence and are considered Jordanians, but they are still at the back of everyone's mind when they hear the word "refugee."

The continued presence of large numbers of Palestinians, decades after they fled from the Occupied Territories, is also a factor in Syria and Lebanon. This is one reason why none of the countries in the region seem to be contemplating setting up refugee camps. UNHCR is not keen on the idea of refugee camps either: "Camps in Jordan means camps in the desert," said UNHCR's Senior Protection Officer in Amman, Anne-Marie Deutschlander. "And camps in the desert are terrible places."

It is a similar story for Syria: "Many of the Iraqis have problems," said UNHCR's representative in Syria, Laurens Jolles. "We try to address individual problems as much as we can, but it is a huge task. Syria has been remarkably accommodating. Syrians do resent the effects this huge influx of people has had on their daily lives,

but there is genuinely still sympathy for the Iraqis and anger and sadness at what has befallen their country."

NO SIMPLE SOLUTIONS

THERE ARE NO EASY SOLUTIONS IN sight in Syria or Jordan. Nor in Egypt, where, as of early March, there were believed to be as many as 100,000 Iraqis; in Lebanon, still recovering from last summer's war, and hosting another 40,000 Iraqis; and the Gulf States which may between them be hosting as many as 200,000.

Given the current situation in Iraq, repatriation is not on the near horizon – but still remains the only feasible long-term solution for most Iraqis. Local integration is clearly not an option in most cases, and resettlement will only help a relatively small proportion.

In the meantime, more infrastructure (schools, clinics, teachers, doctors), paid for by the outside world, is essential – Jordanian and Syrian schools and medical facilities cannot possibly provide education and health care for hundreds of thousands of extra clients.

"If there are 2 million refugees," said UNHCR's Director for the Middle East, Radhouane Nouicer, "then that means perhaps 540,000 extra children of school age, which means thousands of new classrooms. Let's imagine one extra teacher per 60 children – that means 9,000 extra teachers and salaries. Then you have blackboards, desks, books and

other teaching materials – already, on education alone, you are talking tens of millions of dollars. Then you have health, social services, income generation projects. All vital, all very expensive, and all getting more necessary by the day, as the Iraqis' own money runs out. Already we are seeing much more extreme poverty among the new arrivals than was the case two or three years ago."

A number of local and international NGOs are struggling valiantly to run services for refugees – but many fewer than you would expect to find given the huge numbers involved. And perhaps most important – and difficult – of all, there has to be some way for the Iraqis to earn a living. Otherwise poverty and hunger will become seriously destabilizing factors for the Iraqis, and also for their host societies.

"The difficulties of dealing with huge populations of urban refugees are immense," said Radhouane Nouicer. "You can't pay all their rents, you can't feed everybody, you can't even keep track of how many people there are. But you can help around the edges – provide safety nets for the most vulnerable, help the governments out with infrastructure and personnel, try to get other countries to share the responsibilities and the costs. We have to do all of that – and at the same time pray for a quick end to the violence in Iraq. Because, at the end of the day, that is the only real solution." ■

For more details on programmes for Iraqis in the Middle East go to www.unhcr.org

Are Iraqis Getting



UNHCR / M. ROEMERS / NLD-2000

A Dutch family getting to know their new neighbours from Iraq in 2000.
Recent arrivals have tended to receive a much frostier welcome in many industrialized countries.

Statistics raise concerns in industrialized countries.

BY WILLIAM SPINDLER

EVERY DAY PEOPLE ALL OVER THE world see the escalating violence in Iraq on their TV and computer screens. Yet – despite the constant bloodshed – statistics show it has never been more difficult for Iraqis to find protection in industrialized countries.

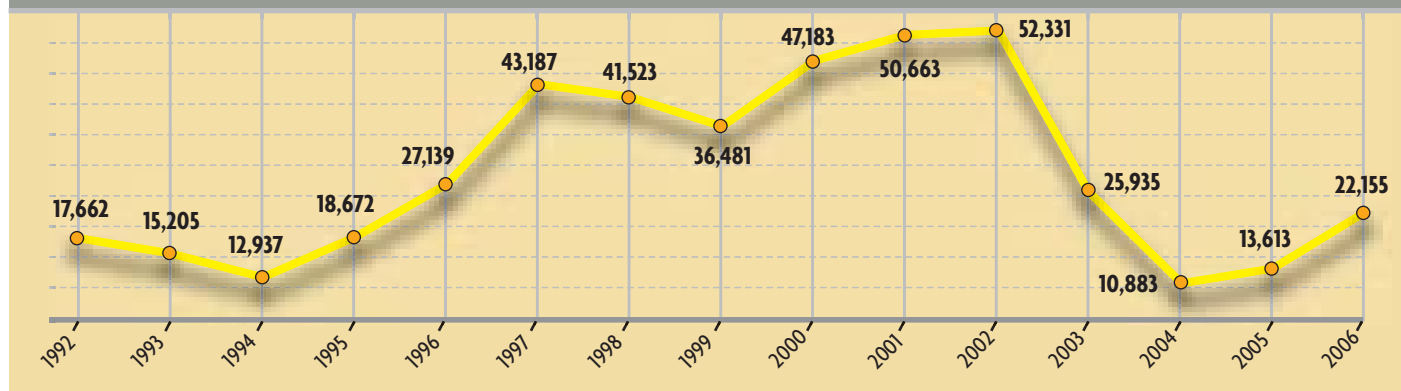
Iman Ramzi*, a vivacious Iraqi woman who has lived in Europe for almost two decades and is married to a European, explained some of the difficulties her fellow citizens face when trying to leave their country: “To get a passport in Iraq is very difficult – you have to pay a hefty bribe. Unless you have a lot of money you can forget about getting a passport,” she said.

Obtaining a valid passport is only the first of many hurdles Iraqis have to negotiate to reach safety, and some sort of peace of mind. Getting out of Iraq at all is physically difficult, as travel across sectarian boundaries has grown increasingly dangerous. Getting a visa for countries in the immediate region has also been growing more and more

a Fair Deal?

TABLE 1

Iraqi asylum applications in 38 industrialized countries, 1992-2006



difficult – and nowadays permission to stay, when granted, is usually strictly time limited. Getting visas to travel further afield is for most Iraqis well nigh impossible.

The obstacles are formidable. Yet, for some, gaining asylum is a matter of life or death.

“Even a well-established person like me finds it practically impossible to get a visa for her closest relatives to come and visit her,” said Iman. “I can’t even take my brothers or sisters out of Iraq to give them a breath of fresh air. My mother died without me being able to see her.”

An immigration officer told her recently: “We don’t want Iraqis here, not even on a visit. If you want to see your family, you can meet them somewhere else.” Another official told her: “You (Iraqis) are a danger to our country.” Like several other refugees interviewed for this article, Iman did not want the European country where she now lives identified. Fear and anxiety seem to pursue Iraqis wherever they go.

Faced with such impediments, many refugees who do not feel safe in the immediate region have little choice but to resort to smugglers who, in exchange for a

fee said to range from US\$ 5,000 to US\$ 20,000, offer to guide them along one of many clandestine and often dangerous routes into Europe.

Abdul’s is a typical case.* A minor member of the Baath party – like hundreds of thousands of others – he worked in a government department during Saddam Hussein’s time. This is enough to condemn him to death in the eyes of some militias. As violence around him escalated, he fled to Syria.

Desperately afraid of being sent back to Iraq, he then moved on with the help of smugglers to Turkey, where he was supplied with false documents that enabled him to travel to Algeria and Morocco. His journey ended in the North African Spanish enclave of Melilla, where he approached the police and requested asylum. After a long wait, he has been granted refugee status by the Spanish authorities. “I arrived in Spain just by accident,” he said in hesitant Spanish, adding that now, finally, he feels safe.

Recent statistics suggest he is one of the luckier of the current generation of Iraqi refugees trying to enter Europe.

Last year, Iraqis lodged some 22,000 asylum applications in industrialized

countries. Although significant, this figure pales in comparison to the estimated two million Iraqis in Syria, Jordan and other Middle Eastern countries. It is also less than half the 52,000 asylum requests made by Iraqis in 2002 – before the war and subsequent collapse of the security situation in Iraq (see table 1).

Since the situation inside Iraq cannot objectively be said to be better now than it was in 2002, why is the number of Iraqi asylum seekers in industrialized countries still so low?

SYSTEM FAILURE?

REFUGEE ADVOCATES ARGUE THE MAIN reason is that restrictive policies in many industrialized countries are either making it very difficult for potential refugees to get there, or – when they do – deterring them from applying for asylum. As a result of their own analysis of likely risks and benefits, refugees may have given up attempting to be recognized as such. If this is the case, then the refugee system built up so painstakingly during the aftermath of World War II is starting to fail.

“We are concerned that European countries – both individually and

collectively – may have sacrificed some protection safeguards in their efforts to reduce the numbers of asylum seekers,” said Judith Kumin, who heads UNHCR’s office in Brussels.

According to Krister Isaksson, an analyst at the Swedish Migration Board, many Iraqis in Europe choose to remain illegal because they believe their asylum request will be denied. “This is how Sweden is different,” he told the AFP news agency. “In Sweden, they opt to seek asylum because they are likely to get permission to stay.” As a result, Sweden received close to half of all the Iraqi asylum applications made in Europe during 2006.

During an EU meeting of justice and interior ministers in February 2007, Swedish Migration and Asylum Policy Minister Tobias Billström made an appeal to other European countries to show more solidarity, and help Sweden (which received 8,950 asylum applications from Iraqis in 2006) share the responsibility of

providing protection to Iraqi refugees. After Sweden, the largest number of Iraqi asylum applications was made in the Netherlands (2,765) followed by Germany, Greece, the UK and Norway (see table 2).

UNREALISTIC RECOGNITION RATES

EVEN THOSE IRAQIS WHO MANAGE TO surmount all the obstacles and seek asylum in an industrialized country, often find the odds are still stacked against them.

Although each asylum application should be examined on its merits, the latest statistics show that, for Iraqi asylum seekers, the chance of finding protection in an industrialized country ranges from over 90% to zero, depending on which country they are in when they apply.

Few countries are recognizing Iraqis as refugees under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. When protection is granted, it tends to be ‘subsidiary protection’ or another ‘humanitarian status,’ which are accompanied by fewer basic legal, social and material benefits.

In addition, large numbers of applications from Iraqis are recorded as being closed without a decision being taken on the merits. While this can be a sign that the applicant has moved on somewhere else, it can also mean that the case was closed on purely formal grounds. Similarly, some European countries record claims as ‘rejected’ when they have determined that another state is responsible for deciding the case under the so-called “Dublin II” regulation.

“There is a real problem with Iraqis being sent back under the Dublin II regulation to Greece, which has frozen the determination of all Iraqi applications since 2003, or to Slovakia, which in 2006 did not extend protection to a single Iraqi,” said UNHCR’s Judith Kumin.

The agency’s Director for Europe, Pirkko Kourula, is also deeply concerned by the failure of the recognition rates to reflect the reality of what is going on inside Iraq: “Given the seriousness of the situation in Iraq,” she said, “one would certainly expect a much higher recognition rate for refugees from that country.”

Human rights organizations have

criticized countries involved militarily in Iraq, saying they appear to be among those least willing to receive Iraqi refugees.

“Up until now very few Iraqis displaced as a result of war have been allowed to take refuge in the US,” said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International’s Director for the Middle East and North Africa. “The US authorities must stand up to their obligations on this issue and help lead the effort to provide long-term durable solutions for Iraqi refugees.”

Responding to such criticisms, the US recently announced it would accept an initial 7,000 refugees from Iraq’s neighbouring countries.

The UK government has also come under fire from NGOs such as Human Rights Watch for its low recognition rate and lack of a resettlement programme for Iraqis. Statistics provided by the UK government to UNHCR show that in 2006, of the 735 decisions made on Iraqi claims, only 85 were positive: a 12 percent overall recognition rate compared to more than 50 percent at the turn of the century (see table 3).

“When European states go as far as sending soldiers to fight for security, democracy and human rights in Iraq, it would be a paradox if the same states then denied protection to the people of Iraq who flee the country because they feel insecure and threatened,” said Bjarte Vandvik, Secretary General of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles.

The UN refugee agency periodically issues advisories to governments regarding conditions in specific countries. In the latest such advisory on Iraq (December 2006) UNHCR characterized the situation as one of “generalized violence” in which “massive targeted violations of human rights are prevalent.”

UNHCR recommended that asylum seekers from southern and central Iraq should be favourably considered as refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention or, failing that, be granted a complementary form of protection (unless, of course, the person in question is ‘excludable’ because of their past involvement in war crimes, crimes against

TABLE 2

Iraqi asylum applications in industrialized countries, 2006 *

COUNTRY OF ASYLUM

Sweden	8,950
Netherlands	2,765
Germany	2,065
Greece	1,415
United Kingdom	1,305
Norway	1,000
Switzerland	815
Belgium	695
USA	535
Denmark	505
Austria	380
Finland	225
Ireland	215
Slovakia	205
Canada	190
Australia	185
Cyprus	130
France	115

* Countries with more than 100 applications

TABLE 3

Recognition rates for Iraqis in 2006 *

IN PERCENTAGES

	Refugee status	Other status	Rejections	Otherwise Closed	Overall Protection Rate
Austria	† 35	18	18	47	74
Belgium	8	1	61	30	13
Canada	86	0	7	7	93
Cyprus	0	43	11	47	80
Denmark	0	3	97	0	3
Finland	6	54	0	39	100
France	0 *	23 *	77	0	23
Germany	7	1	68	24	11
Greece	0	0	89	11	0
Netherlands	1	18	56	25	25
Norway	2	36	31	30	56
Slovak Rep.	0	0	32	68	0
Sweden	3	77	8	12	91
Switzerland	13	0	68	19	16
UK	3	8	88	1	12

* States which made more than 100 decisions, first instance procedure only (preliminary figures)

† Number granted refugee status includes first and second instance decisions

* The figure for 'other status' may include some cases who were granted 'refugee status.'

humanity or other similarly serious crimes).

UNHCR's advisory concluded that no Iraqi from southern or central Iraq should be forcibly returned until there is a substantial improvement in the security and human rights situation in the country. With regard to the generally more stable Northern Governorates of Iraq, UNHCR recommends that no one be returned to a situation of internal displacement.

"We all know what is happening in Iraq today. If people cannot find protection in Iraq, then we must ensure that they find it when they escape" said UNHCR's Pirkko Kourula. "And we cannot reasonably expect Jordan and Syria, which are already bulging at the seams, to do it alone."

Although most industrialized countries have so far refrained from returning those Iraqis to whom they deny any positive status, the result is a large number of people living in a legal limbo. This is the case in Germany and Denmark, where rejected asylum seekers from Iraq are allowed to stay for the time being as "tolerated persons." In Greece, where no decisions have been made on Iraqi cases since 2003, they live from hand to mouth from one day to the next.

Despite a commitment to an EU-wide common asylum system, countries in Europe not only take differing approaches to Iraqi claims, but they also apply very different standards of treatment to asylum seekers. Some countries routinely detain them while their applications are being processed, while others do not. Some countries such as Belgium and non-EU member Switzerland continue to provide accommodation to asylum seekers who have been turned down for refugee status, but who are appealing against that decision – while others do not always do so, forcing many people into homelessness and destitution.

Even Iraqis who have successfully negotiated all the obstacles, and have been recognized as refugees, can find themselves without legal protection. In Germany, nearly 19,000 Iraqi refugees had their refugee status revoked between 2003 and 2006, based on the argument that they had fled the Saddam Hussein regime and therefore the circumstances for their recognition were no longer present. Last year alone, the German Office for Migration and Refugees revoked the refugee status of 4,228 Iraqis.

In many cases, this means these people

lose their legal resident status and are deprived of their basic refugee rights: they have little or no access to the labour market and are often not eligible for family reunification or participation in local integration programmes. Since "tolerated" individuals are, from a legal point of view, obliged to depart, they have hardly any prospect of obtaining a safe and durable residence status in Germany. But for many, return to Iraq is simply not an option in the current circumstances.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres has appealed to countries outside the immediate region to accept Iraqi refugees for resettlement.

"We would be very happy if more Iraqis could be resettled to European and other industrialized countries," said UNHCR's Judith Kumin. "It is one way of showing solidarity with countries in the region – and for quite a few individuals resettlement is an absolutely vital solution. But we have to face up to the fact that there are many Iraqis already in the industrialized countries who are not getting proper protection."

Like countless other refugees before them, people fleeing the conflict in Iraq are often tarnished by the violence which they are trying to escape. Addressing the League of Arab States' Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs in Cairo in March, High Commissioner Guterres said: "Even in the most developed societies, we see the re-emergence of racism, xenophobia and that brand of populism which always tries to generate confusion in public opinion between refugees, migrants and even terrorists. Let us be perfectly clear: refugees are not terrorists, they are the first victims of terror."

UNHCR's Europe Director Pirkko Kourula underlined the fundamental principles: "The legal and moral obligations to protect refugees and asylum seekers still exist," she said, "and many Iraqis are right now in dire need of that protection. Most of them will never set eyes on Europe, or any of the other industrialized countries, but those who do deserve our respect. More than that, they need our clear, unequivocal protection." ■

*Name changed

Shame

How the world has turned its back on the Palestinian refugees in Iraq.

BY RUPERT COLVILLE

Al Tanf camp is not a place you want to be. Heading east out of Damascus, you enter an endless flat, bleak, desert landscape that continues to the Iraqi frontier. Between the two countries' border posts lie about five kilometres of no-man's land – also flat and bleak. A third of the way in sprawls a scrappy, shabby settlement of 100 tents: Al Tanf.

Large piles of tomatoes sit rotting next to the camp, dumped by a truck that had to wait too many days at the border. Scraps of cloth flicker all along the barbed wire that runs behind the camp. Shredded plastic bags bowl along in the wind.

There are snakes, and two types of scorpion – which between them have stung the camp's 350 residents 70 times.

It is not a place for families, not a place to bring up 81 children between the ages of 3 and 15. There used to be 82, but one was run over by a truck a few months back.

They have five big school tents now. This development – schooling for the kids – has done wonders for morale (for a while, anyway). The adults smile as they describe the effect on the kids. The kids look rather proud as they answer a question posed by one of the eight teachers who were allowed by the Syrian authorities to go to Damascus for training in a joint initiative by UNHCR and the Palestinians' own refugee agency UNRWA.

UNRWA has a mandate for all the Palestinian refugees in the Occupied Territories and the next-door countries, including Syria. UNHCR has a mandate to protect Palestinian refugees elsewhere, including Iraq. But these Palestinians are



A 15-year-old Palestinian girl and her father display their torture scars. Palestinian refugees trapped in Iraq have been frequently targeted for killings, kidnappings and torture.

PARIS MATCH / T. ESCH / SYR2006

in no-man's land. The UN agencies are cooperating well, trying their best to win a concession here, get a sick person to hospital there. In mid-February, as part of another joint initiative, they were going to fully wire the camp, with UNHCR paying, and UNRWA providing the electrical engineers.

One member of the refugee committee is an electrician, so he'll be in charge of maintaining this project. Another was a real estate agent. Then there is a clothes designer, the owner of small sweet factory, a jeweller and a former executive of one of Iraq's biggest telecommunications companies.

Most of the other people living in this hell-hole, where temperatures can rise to 50 degrees in the summer and fall below zero in winter, were urban professionals or traders.

UNHCR staff visit three or four times a week. They are greeted with smiles and warm handshakes – though it hasn't

always been like that. For a while, the refugees were angry. Why wasn't UNHCR getting them out of Al Tanf? In the autumn, they went on hunger strike for 15 days. But now they realize the agencies are doing their best.

It is the states they blame – both those in the region, and those beyond: as of early March there were few indications of any states being prepared to help out through resettlement.

By mid-March more than 800 Palestinians were trapped in three desert camps, including Al Tanf and its much worse neighbour, Al Walid camp (situated on the Iraqi side of the border).

The twice-displaced Palestinian refugees are one of the worst-off groups in a country full of desperate people. Some 15,000 of them remain trapped inside Iraq, in increasingly dire straits. As of mid-March 2007, at least 186 were known to have been murdered, and many others have been chased from their homes, kidnapped, arrested or tortured.

They have no country to go to, no valid travel documents, no protectors inside Iraq, and hardly anyone prepared to support them outside either. Only a few dozen have been resettled (by Canada from Ruweished camp in Jordan), and a group of 287 were taken in by Syria in May 2006. UNHCR has stressed that resettlement should be seen as a temporary solution for Palestinians, and should in no way jeopardize their 'right to return.'

"My son was born in Ruweished," said one 60-year-old man, who like many of Iraq's Palestinians originated from Haifa. "Now, he's in Al Tanf camp and he doesn't know where he'll end up. I was born in a tent myself – in a camp in Gaza."

"There's heaven and there's hell," commented another resident of Al Tanf. "And we're worried we won't get in there either."

If ever resettlement or relocation of some sort was needed for a particular endangered group, it is needed for the Palestinians of Iraq.

It is to everyone's dishonour that these human beings are still rotting in Al Tanf, in Al Walid, in Ruweished and – worst of all – in Baghdad where one or more is being murdered virtually every day. ■

Take a group of traumatized Sierra Leonean musicians from the refugee camps of Guinea at the turn of the century; add three tenacious young American filmmakers who had never made a film before; blend these with a UNHCR staff member driven by a belief that music can both heal and publicize the plight of refugees; stir in a bunch of wild ideas, a succession of outrageous coincidences and a string of celebrity godmothers — and what do you end up with?

The incredible story of the Refugee All Stars of Sierra Leone

CINDERELLAS OF REGGAE



COURTESY OF A. MITCHELL



Franco plays guitar in Freetown, with fellow All Stars Reuben, Black Nature, Grace, and Niko (of the Emperors).

COURTESY OF B. WHITE / SLE

BY RUPERT COLVILLE

REUBEN KOROMA found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time on 2 June 1997. When the decade-long war in Sierra Leone made one of its periodic lunges into the capital, Freetown, his world changed forever. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF), led by the notorious Foday Sankoh had, together with a group of ex-army rebels, just toppled the civilian government of President Kabbah and was locked in a battle for possession of



UNHCR / SATELLITE IMAGE MAP © 1996-2004 PLANETARY VISIONS

the international airport with the West African peacekeeping force ECOMOG.

When the fighting was over, ECOMOG forces mistook Reuben for a rebel and arrested him. "I was carrying dreadlocks. They thought I'd been in the bush for a long time," he told REFUGEES in a recent interview. In fact, he was a singer with a band called the Emperors.

Sierra Leone was in some ways the Iraq of its day. By the time the civil war ended in 2002, tens of thousands had been killed, and tens of thousands more had been raped or mutilated. It was one of the most savage, senseless wars of the late 20th century, fuelled by despair, greed and diamonds. However, it attracted a

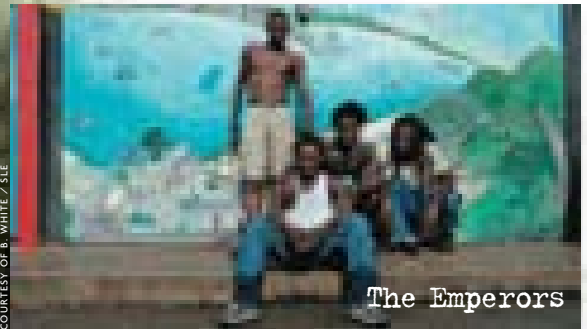


You left your country
to seek refuge
In another man's land.
You will be confronted
by strange dialects
And you will be fed
with unusual diets.
You've got to sleep in
a tarpaulin house
Which is so hot.
You've got to sleep on
a tarpaulin mat
Which is so cold.
Living like a refugee
is not easy
It's really not easy

Lyrics from
"LIVING LIKE A REFUGEE"



Grace in Texas



The Emperors

**“NOWHERE IS THE HEALING POWER
OF MUSIC MORE EVIDENT THAN IN
THE REMARKABLE STORY OF SIERRA
LEONE’S REFUGEE ALL STARS.”**

Chicago Sun-Times

fraction of the attention of Iraq. What attention it has received has tended to come through the efforts of film and documentary directors – like Sorious Samura’s searing documentary ‘Cry Freetown’ (2000), and more recently the Oscar-nominated film ‘Blood Diamond.’

After he was freed, Reuben and his wife Efuah Grace decided it was too dangerous to stay any longer. Unable to reach their two small daughters, who were staying across the river in Freetown with Reuben’s sister, they walked for two days until they reached Guinea.

The rainy season was in full swing, and the camps in Guinea were at their most depressing. “I thought there is no

way for me to play music again. But I was thinking that I would one day form my own band, even in a refugee camp.” For the time being, however, “it was just me and Grace singing at home sometimes.”

A BAND IS BORN

IN FEBRUARY 1998, THEY WERE MOVED to a camp called Kalia where they met Francis John Langba – known as Franco – who had managed to bring his guitar with him into exile. “I knew him,” said Reuben. “I used to see him playing in a band when I was a schoolboy. Myself, Franco, and my wife started playing. Just for fun. In the camp we were confined in one place. Nothing to do. Instead of

sitting there for the rest of the day thinking about our problems, let’s play music!”

In the autumn of 2000, the war spilled over into Guinea when the RUF and their allies launched a series of cross-border attacks from both Sierra Leone and Liberia. A UNHCR staff member, Mensah Kpognon, was killed and another kidnapped in September; and a second one was abducted in December. As a result, virtually all aid agencies withdrew for several months from the south-eastern part of Guinea, where some 200,000 Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees were housed in a string of border camps – several of which were attacked by angry local residents,

“FANTASTIC. THESE MUSICIANS... HAVE MADE SOMETHING UPLIFTING AND BEAUTIFUL.”

BILL FLANAGAN of MTV on CBS News

who blamed the refugees for the cross-border incursions.

Reuben remembers this difficult period all too well: “No UNHCR, no food, no medicine. Refugees had to get by by selling things.” He and Grace sold their most valuable possession – a bicycle – but Franco hung on to his guitar.

In the spring of 2001, UNHCR was able to get back into the south east and began relocating the refugees from the lethal border region deeper inside Guinea. Reuben, Grace and Franco were moved to a new camp, Sembakounya, where they met Abdul Rahim Kamara (known as ‘Arahim’), Mohammed Bangura (‘Medo’) and the 15-year-old rapper Alhaji Jeffrey Kamara (‘Black Nature’). Together, they formed the Refugee All Stars.

All three new members had suffered appalling personal losses during the war in Sierra Leone.

Black Nature had been seized by RUF rebels when he was 11 years old, and had to watch as his father was burned to death inside his car. The boy was then taken by the rebels and forced to be a porter – child soldiers and slaves being another feature of this most vicious of wars. After a few months he escaped to Guinea. Impressed by his enthusiastic rap style, he was “adopted” by Reuben, Grace and the rest of the band.

Arahim, who plays the harmonica and was one of the band’s original trio of backing vocalists, had his left arm hacked off at the shoulder. A very religious man, he remains philosophical about his experiences: “What they did to me is a fractional part of my body,” he said. “So I take it as a destiny... Even the one that did that... I’ll greet him. I’ll forgive and forget.”

Mohammed Bangura saw both his parents killed in front of him, and then – as if that wasn’t bad enough – the rebels



Abdul Rahim Kamara, Efuah Grace, and Mohammed Bangura performing in a camp in Guinea

forced him to beat his own baby to death with the family’s pestle and mortar. After that, they cut off his hand and tried to hack out one of his eyes with a machete. “They broke my heart,” he says quietly at one point in the award-winning documentary that was subsequently made about the band.

Music was the medium that helped them all gradually pick up the pieces and start to look forward. “When I’m playing,” said Arahim, “I forget about myself for the moment – what has happened to me.”

Group leader Reuben Koroma’s particular skill lies in his ability to describe the war and what it’s like to be a refugee using an infectious upbeat rhythm – without it seeming incongruous.

“Telling a sad story through sad music would be boring,” he told REFUGEES. “If you make it more in a happy mood, people will really learn from it... When we were in the refugee camps we tried to take our minds off the horrid things that happened. So we were playing to make ourselves happy.”

The band started to make a name for themselves in the camps with their original mix of styles including reggae, rap and traditional Sierra Leonean ‘goombay’

music. “Later on, UNHCR saw we can be very useful to the community,” says Reuben. “They introduced us to a French Canadian NGO, CECI, who provided us with two electric guitars, one amplifier, one mixer, two mikes, two speakers and one generator.”

It was a defining moment for the band.

THE FILM

IN EARLY 2002, ZACH NILES (WHO HAD been working on the promotional side with Paul McCartney and Rolling Stones tours), and an old university friend called Banker White, were thinking about making a documentary about Africa: “something different – something that would bring the human side to the story.” Gradually they had settled on the idea of making a film about refugees, and – since they were musicians – maybe about music as well.

They had never actually been to a refugee camp: “We didn’t even know if people played music in refugee camps. So we just talked about it in this vague way for a long time.”

Then, by chance, they heard about Alphonse Munyaneza, a UNHCR official who was thinking along similar lines.





Reuben and Arahim, after winning the Grand Jury Prize at the 2005 AFI International Film Festival in Los Angeles.

“We used the international language of Bob Marley,” said Niles, with Chris Velan on vocals, and himself, Alphonse and Banker White on guitars and drums. “People were gathering around looking at this white Canadian guy belting out Bob Marley perfectly, and they got really excited about that.” Refugees would get up and join in, and the foreigners worked as their backup band.

They came across many talented young reggae and rap singers, as well as a band of blind drummers. “In one camp we found this Liberian guy named Peewee who hadn’t touched a guitar in three years,” said Niles.

“So we handed him one. He was phenomenal. You could just see it on his face, the emotion that he expressed that he was finally holding a guitar – and playing it. Nobody in the camp knew he was a guitar player.”

But it was in Sembakounya – the fourth and last camp they visited – that they struck gold.

“We didn’t even set up a concert,” said Niles. “We just showed up unannounced on a Sunday and we found this guy on a bicycle... and we said ‘Do you know any musicians here?’ And he said ‘Yeah, come follow me.’ And so we followed him up this path to a hut.” It was called ‘The Place to Be Bar.’

“We’d found earlier on that nobody had guitars in any of the camps... And all of a sudden we heard this strumming coming from inside [the hut], and there were these guys sitting around with two or three guitars, playing harmonicas and singing – and the first song we heard them sing was ‘Living Like A Refugee, it’s not easy.’”

The three North Americans looked at each other in disbelief: “This song was so directly about their experiences, so

directly saying this is who we are, this is what we are going through, and these are the difficulties we are facing – but doing it with this song that was so upbeat... And then when we asked them what their name was – they said: ‘The Refugee All Stars.’”

It was perfect – indeed it went beyond what they had been looking for: “Just the idea of Refugee All Stars – saying yeah, we’re refugees, but you know we’re Refugee All Stars, and putting this positive spin on it!”

With full logistical support from UNHCR, they took the band on a tour of the other refugee camps. The All Stars were not complaining. “As musicians, we like to see a crowd,” remarked Reuben Koroma dryly.

After ten days – with some wonderful footage in the bag, but only the beginnings of a story – the three fledgling film-makers had to go home.

“We didn’t have any funding for this project the first time around,” said Zach Niles. “We did it just on credit cards and savings and that kind of thing. We went back home for about a year.” Niles went on tour again with Paul McCartney to earn some money while Banker White edited an 11-minute trailer in an effort to raise funds to complete the documentary.

Reuben Koroma takes up the story: “In 2003, they wrote and asked what was the plan? We said we want to go to a studio [to make an album]. They offered Freetown. That was a very big problem... We really thought that it’s very risky for us to go back to Freetown. We said ‘Let’s go to Ghana, to Ivory Coast.’ But only Freetown was on offer.”

Getting the band to go to their home country on a “go and see visit” had been Alphonse Munyaneza’s idea. The war in Sierra Leone had finally ended in January 2002, and tens of thousands of refugees had already returned with or without UNHCR’s assistance. But many, including the Refugee All Stars, were so scarred by their experiences, they could not believe it was safe to go back.

The negotiations took place on camera, and it shows how the film and the personal lives of the band and film-makers were becoming inextricably

Alphonse was also a musician – and a refugee. He had left Rwanda for Belgium in 1991, and joined UNHCR shortly afterwards. A few years later, he set up the ‘4Refugees Artist Network’ – essentially a network of refugees and others who would produce cultural events or activities – art, theatre, music, film, writing of various sorts – for the benefit of refugees.

Zach Niles contacted Alphonse – who was then stationed in East Timor. “I explained our idea of focusing on a refugee musician and how he uses music to help himself pull through,” Niles recalled. “Alphonse wrote back and said ‘I love it – this is perfect. I’ll take some vacation and meet you in Guinea in two months.’”

“Neither of us had made a film before,” continued Niles. “It was just an idea. Alphonse kind of challenged us.” So Niles and White went out and bought cameras and plane tickets, and also roped in a third university friend, a Canadian musician called Chris Velan.

On Alphonse’s advice, they decided to approach the camps as musicians who had come to entertain and look for fellow musicians, rather than going straight in and saying they would shoot a documentary.

intertwined: “We are only going there because of you,” Reuben says as the camera rolls. “We trust you.”

The documentary follows their return and their reunion with family members and other musicians, including Reuben’s old band, the Emperors, and its charismatic lead guitarist Ashade Pearce.

A recording studio was identified, and the All Stars and the Emperors – who henceforward fused into a more or less single, if somewhat fluid, entity – fulfilled their dream and cut their first album.

Finally, convinced the time was ripe for repatriation, the band returned to the camps in Guinea and spread the word to fellow refugees. Their participation in public meetings helped galvanize the process. “It had a huge impact,” said Alphonse Munyaneza. “It was a good life decision for them and good operationally for UNHCR.”

The band members themselves went home for good in February 2004 – all except Mohammed Bangura who, after the terrible things that had happened to him, still couldn’t face Sierra Leone. He lingered on in Guinea until Reuben, Black Nature, Alphonse and others gently persuaded him to return home in the summer of 2006.



Busking on the streets of Miami after picking up another film festival award.

The repatriation gave the film-makers a natural conclusion to their story. They returned to the US with a total of some 400 hours of footage to edit. “It is the ultimate hand-to-mouth production,” remarked Alphonse. “But they didn’t

come with Western eyes: top down, ignorant. They went about it in the right way.”

LIFT OFF

IN 2005, AT THE AMERICAN Film Institute’s International Film Festival in Los Angeles, their remarkable film “Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars” won the prestigious Grand Jury Prize for best documentary, repaying the faith showed in it by an impressive list of backers that at various times has included Keith Richard, Paul McCartney, Angelina Jolie, producer Steve Bing, and Ice Cube. It has since gone on to receive a dozen more awards at festivals around the world.

And then a chance meeting occurred that would subsequently have a huge impact on the All Stars’ career. Niles decided to screen the film in his home town in Vermont. “The screening starts and these two guys come in off the street – Steve Tyler and Joe Perry of Aerosmith, who had houses near by,” said Niles.

The famous rock stars watched the film, and stayed on for a Q and A session afterwards. Later, a couple of US\$100 bills mysteriously showed up in the box containing the proceeds from T-shirt and CD sales outside the movie theatre.

The band’s first US tour, paid for by Niles and White, took place in March 2006. To help arrange this, they approached a well-known booking and management agency called Rosebud, run by music industry veteran Mike Kappus, with a small but impressive list of artists such as the late John Lee Hooker, Charlie Watts, JJ. Cale and Booker T. Jones.

At one point on the tour, after performing at a major festival in Austin, Texas, the band decided to take to the

streets to raise some money for Franco’s upcoming wedding back in Sierra Leone. As they began playing on some hotel steps, a big crowd gathered and people started to dance – as people almost invariably do when they hear the music of Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars. As luck would have it, a music publishing executive happened to come past and stopped to watch. He spoke to Kappus, and a couple of hours later – around 1:00 a.m. – emailed him a draft deal.

That summer, Rosebud arranged a seven-week tour (35 performances in all) that included some major festivals in the US, Canada and Japan. For a band that still hadn’t released an album in any of these countries, the tour was an extraordinary success. “Nobody gets into these prime events without a record,” said Kappus. “It just doesn’t happen.”

It was also during this tour that the All Stars’ extraordinary relationship with the American rock band Aerosmith took another step forward.

Lead guitarist Joe Perry had approached Niles offering to fund a performance by the band in their home town. “They hadn’t a clue who he was,” says Niles. “I had to explain that he was a rock-and-roll guitar legend.” Later, Perry went up and played with them on stage.

He noticed that Ashade Pierce, a left-



COURTESY OF B. LYNN/USA



“THE FILM’S STORY WAS SO MOVING IT LEFT AN INDELIBLE MARK ON US ALL. IT’S RARE TO SEE SO MUCH HEART AND HONESTY IN MUSIC... I HAVE NEVER PLAYED WITH THAT KIND OF BAND BEFORE BUT I WAS TRANSPORTED TO ANOTHER PLACE AND THE NOTES JUST FLEW...”

**JOE PERRY, of AEROSMITH,
after playing with the
Refugee All Stars in Nashville.**

handed guitarist, was playing with a right-handed guitar and a few days later sent over a brand new left-handed six-string. “And then, throughout the tour,” says Niles, “he kept supplying the band with other new instruments and equipment he felt they might need.”

In the autumn of 2006, the band’s album was officially released on the Anti record label, and they made their third major tour in six months. This time, they were invited to open a big Aerosmith concert at the Mohegan Sun Arena in Connecticut. It was here, for the first time, they really saw what it was like to be rock-and-roll superstars.

“It was a real fairy tale,” said Alphonse Munyaneza, recalling how they drew up in a small battered van next to a line of gleaming buses, vans and stretch limousines.

Reuben Koroma and the rest of the All Stars were astonished when they were informed that all the vehicles belonged to Aerosmith. “Then we went backstage,” he said, “where we saw about 100 people – and they were all working for Aerosmith! And there was food for everyone. Lots of food. And we were: WHAT? A musician employs over 100 people? That surprised us, really.”

Before the concert, Perry, Tyler and the Refugee All Stars made a studio

recording of John Lennon’s song “Give Peace a Chance” for a charity compilation for Darfur; and later, Perry and the All Stars cut a version of U2’s “Seconds” for a separate charity compilation of African artists performing U2 songs. Both recordings are due to be released in mid-2007.

Meanwhile, in between breaks back in Sierra Leone, the Refugee All Stars road-show continues: in December 2006 both the band and the documentary featured on the Oprah Winfrey Show, and a month later the All Stars played two sessions at the World Economic Forum in Davos, as part of their commitment to promote UNHCR’s [ninemillion.org](http://www.ninemillion.org) campaign on behalf of refugee children (see www.ninemillion.org).

A mini-tour of Australia is scheduled for April 2007, and Rosebud and the ever-enterprising film-makers have a number of other projects lined up for both band and film.

“Are we making money yet?” says Zach Niles, somewhat wearily. “We haven’t paid ourselves a salary in two and a half years at this point. We’ll do it differently next time: we should have got funding ahead of time, but sometimes when you feel so strongly about something you just go for it. Is there money coming in? Yes. Is it anywhere near the

money that has been going out? No.”

Same story for the band: “If it wasn’t for the merchandise [i.e. T-shirts and CDs], we wouldn’t be covering costs,” says Rosebud’s Kappus. But he doesn’t regret becoming involved. “I’ve been in the music business for 38 years and it’s unlike anything else I’ve dealt with.”

But it is UNHCR’s Alphonse Munyaneza, who has spent twelve years urging refugees to make music – and using music to promote refugee issues – who (while recalling the Aerosmith concert in Connecticut) puts his finger on perhaps the most interesting and valuable aspect of the whole Refugee All Stars experience:

“The band played for 30 minutes, the crowd got to its feet. After that, they showed a short clip from the documentary. There was sustained applause, before Aerosmith came on to play.” He paused. “Then, at the end, Aerosmith again invited the crowd to applaud the All Stars. It gripped my throat.

“It had become cool to be a refugee.” ■

The album ‘Living Like A Refugee’ can be bought on-line or via good music stores. To check on the latest news about the band, visit www.rosebudus.com and go to www.refugeeallstars.org to find out more about the documentary and taste the music.

