



JHA: Iraqi refugees need urgent EU action

(Brussels, 18 April) Tomorrow's Justice and Home Affairs Council should deliver a coherent EU policy that offers protection to Iraqi refugees as well as practical assistance to neighbouring countries currently responsible for the welfare of up to two million displaced people.

At a joint press conference today, Amnesty International and the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) called for urgent action by the EU in response to the developing humanitarian crisis that is fuelling further instability in the region.

Freshly returned from Jordan, Amnesty International's researcher on Iraq described the hardships faced by an estimated one million Iraqis who have sought protection there. Without a residence permit, a great majority is deprived of access to work, school, health care and other basic facilities. Most also live under the threat of being sent back to Iraq, particularly in light of recent deportations that seem to have resulted in deaths. (See Amnesty letter and findings at www.amnesty-eu.org)

"The situation is very tense, neighbouring countries – in particular Jordan and Syria – are struggling to cope with the exodus of refugees from Iraq. The EU must do something about it, we are talking about an imminent humanitarian crisis" said Carsten Jurgensen, Amnesty International's researcher on Iraq.

Nawal Abdul Karim, representing the Iraqi Women's League, said: "Every day I talk to women who are leaving for Syria, because in Iraq they cannot leave their houses without a male escort, they live in terror of being kidnapped for ransom, tortured or murdered, or losing their homes to criminal gangs."

"In order for these countries to continue to protect refugees, Europe has to be more generous when it comes to resettlement and show that it is also ready to share the responsibility for protecting Iraqis" added Kris Pollet, from Amnesty International's EU office.

ECRE pointed to the great disparities between European countries in their treatment of Iraqi asylum seekers and refugees and presented guidelines aimed at making policies more coherent, consistent with international standards, and supportive of countries in the region. (See Guidelines at www.ecre.org)

"Europe must demonstrate the commitment to refugee protection that it expects of others. Ministers must end the protection lottery for Iraqis in Europe by determining asylum cases fairly and consistently, suspending forced returns to Iraq and allowing those who cannot be returned to live in dignity" said ECRE's Secretary-General, Bjarte Vandvik, on his return from an international conference in Geneva on the humanitarian situation faced by Iraqis.

The organizations have called on EU Member States to:

- develop a coherent EU policy that offers a significant number of resettlement possibilities in Europe for Iraqi refugees;
- guarantee that no one will be forcibly returned to Iraq;
- enable Iraqi asylum seekers whose applications have been rejected to live in dignity until conditions are conducive to return;
- and provide technical and financial assistance such as for health care and education, to neighbouring countries to assist refugees in the region.

BACKGROUND

According to the latest UNHCR estimates there are at least 1.8 million Iraqis displaced internally and up to 2 million in neighbouring countries. Recently, thousands have also sought refuge in Europe: compared to 2005 the number of asylum claims lodged by Iraqi citizens has increased by 77%. Within the EU, Sweden is one of the only countries granting refugee status or other protection to almost all Iraqi asylum seekers. Some countries have a minimal recognition rate, while others go as far as enforcing returns.

For further comment/background and interviews:

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http://www.ecre.org/resources/project_documents/684