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Iraq: Fix the Public Distribution System to Meet Needs of the Displaced

Iraq's internally displaced are in desperate need of assistance as the Public Distribution System (PDS) that they and other Iraqis depend on for food and fuel is broken. Poor management is to blame for its shortcomings, as well as terrible security and a general lack of political will on the part of the Government of Iraq to acknowledge the scope of the crisis.

With the central government unable or at times unwilling to protect and assist Iraqi civilians, donor governments must step in to fill the gaps. Reform of the PDS should be a priority, and agencies such as the US Department of Agriculture and the UN World Food Program (WFP) must provide the technical assistance required to ensure the system is once again fully functional and able to reach the most vulnerable Iraqis.

Under the former regime of Saddam Hussein every Iraqi had the right to receive rations through the PDS system established during the sanctions period in the context of the Oil for Food program that began in 1995. Run by the Iraqi Ministry of Trade, the PDS was one of the most efficient institutions of the Iraqi state. Iraq, which had once been a net exporter of food, depended on imports, importing up to four hundred and eighty tons of food per month before the war. Eighty percent of Iraqis benefited from the PDS and for sixty percent of Iraqis the food basket was their only source of outside support. Ministry of Trade distribution warehouses throughout the country fed local branches. Each family had a card it redeemed in the neighborhood PDS branch. The family was tied to that branch alone.

Following the American-led military coalition's overthrow of the former regime, the Oil for Food program was interrupted. The UN World Food Program (WFP) stepped in to fill the void, supporting the existing infrastructure. After the war, food rations became more important than ever. There were fewer jobs and no salaries.

The new Iraqi government was able to resume running the PDS and its efficiency meant that in 2004, as the Iraqi

elections were being organized for January 2005, the PDS rolls supplied the data used for voter registration. The quality of the data was remarkably accurate. Ninety percent of people found themselves on the list, though there was a 20 percent error rate in details such as date of birth and place of birth. Food was simply swapped for ballots. Thus the PDS cards acquired a new political significance, and this significance still lasts today, even though the cards are technically separated.

With around one million Iraqis internally displaced before the March 2003 war and the additional recent displacement of nearly one million Iraqis due to factional violence, the PDS system is now more important than ever to reach these vulnerable people, who often have no source of livelihood. The effectiveness and efficiency of the PDS, however, have declined significantly. Roads throughout Iraq have become increasingly treacherous as the result of criminal gangs and militias. This has meant that PDS supply trucks are often unable to reach their destined governorates, leaving much of the country cut off. Administrative corruption has weakened the efficiency of the distribution system. Those supply convoys that do reach their destination often carry only limited amounts of the PDS basket, with key items missing.

Like other UN agencies, the WFP views its role as supporting the Iraqi government. Thus, its assistance programs are managed by the government, and it does not act unilaterally or against the government's will. Taking over the management of the crumbling PDS would be another indicator that the Iraqi state is failing, and WFP and other agencies are reluctant to take any step that would suggest this is the case.

The situation in the three northern governorates of Erbil, Dohuk and Suleimaniya illustrates the vulnerability of internally displaced people as the result of their inability to access the Public Distribution System. These three governorates, often referred to as Kurdistan by the Kurds who make up their majority, have been an exception to the violence in the rest of Iraq. As a result many internally displaced Iraqis, at least 150,000 in the estimate of Refugees International, have sought shelter there. They all had to seek permission from the Kurdish authorities prior to gaining access to the north.

These internally displaced Iraqis represent all segments of Iraqi society. They are Kurds from other parts of Iraq such as Mosul, Baghdad or Diyala; they are also Christians, Turkmen, and Sunni and Shiite Arabs. Some fled the general state of violence while others fled direct threats. Many could not take their belongings with them. Most rent houses or apartments at prices far higher than what they were accustomed to. Most are also unable to find work. There are few support networks or organizations providing help to these needy Iraqis. The PDS would be more important than ever, but it does not reach those Iraqis internally displaced in the three northern governorates.

In late February and early March, Refugees International visited numerous internally displaced people in the cities and villages of the three northern governorates, and interviewed government officials, local authorities and representatives of the United Nations and non-governmental organizations that provide aid. Based on these visits and meetings, Refugees International believes that virtually none of the post-2003 internally displaced people in the three northern governorates have access to the PDS, putting them in a dire financial situation. "Without the monthly food rations, I don't know how to feed my children," a Sunni Arab woman from Baghdad told RI. Because the PDS cards for each Iraqi family are tied to a specific location, when a family relocates it must apply at its local PDS branch for the transfer of its card, which must then be processed at the Ministry of Trade before the new PDS branch is notified.

The insecurity and violence that have caused so many Iraqis to flee prevent them from returning to the very neighborhoods they fled in order to apply for the PDS transfer. As a result, most of the displaced in the north manage to obtain some of their PDS rations only on rare occasions when relatives send the rations to them or when they pay others to collect the rations. Although some have tried to transfer their PDS registration cards, none have succeeded.

This can be attributed in part to the difficulties the Iraqi government faces operating in such a restrictive security environment. The insurgency has cut off governorates and

government offices from one another. Security concerns dominate all other priorities.

But Refugees International is concerned that there are also political reasons preventing the transfer of PDS cards to new locations. Iraqi authorities are in denial about the extent of the violence and displacement, maintaining that it is a small scale and temporary problem. As such they are reluctant to initiate a process that could enshrine the displacement, potentially encouraging the displaced to view their new locations as permanent. Given Iraq's sectarian and ethnic strife, any demographic shifts are inherently laden with political implications. Both the Iraqi government, dominated as it is by a Shiite coalition, and the Kurdish government in the north are reluctant to lose their constituencies due to the displacement.

Because the PDS cards are also the basis for voter registration, and Iraqis vote according to the location where they are registered, any transfer of the PDS card could conceivably allow Iraqis to vote in their new locations. This is something the Kurdish authorities, facing a wave of Arab migration from the south, are particularly sensitive about. Refugees International has been told that Shiite IDPs who have fled from other parts of Iraq to the south have on occasion been successful in changing their PDS locations, perhaps because the Shiite-dominated government is sympathetic to their plight and they have moved into friendly Shiite-dominated governorates.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ Iraqi security forces and Multi-National Coalition forces increase security for the PDS supply convoys along the roads in Iraq and for the PDS warehouses.
- ❑ The Iraqi Anti-Corruption Commission vigilantly pursue cases of administrative corruption in the Ministry of Trade.
- ❑ A temporary PDS card system be established so that the displaced can receive their rations without any implications for their permanent residence or their voting status.
- ❑ The US Department of Agriculture advise and assist the Iraqi Ministry of Trade to reform the PDS system.
- ❑ The UN recognize that Iraq is in the midst of a humanitarian crisis and not merely a country in need of support and development. WFP should be empowered to step in directly to bolster the PDS system.

Advocate Kristele Younes and consultant Nir Rosen assessed the internal displacement situation in northern Iraq in February and March.