

## **Statement of the Representative of the Secretary-General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, Walter Kälin**

The International Conference on Addressing the Humanitarian Needs of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons inside Iraq and in Neighbouring Countries  
17 – 18 April 2007

---

Distinguished Chairperson, Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I appreciate the opportunity to address this important conference and join my voice with others in expressing appreciation to the High Commissioner for his initiative in convening this meeting.

Given my mandate as Representative of the Secretary General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, I would like to address the issue of the almost 2 million internally displaced Iraqis, of whom over 700,000 have been displaced in the past 14 months. Reports indicate that internal displacement is continuing and, unless peace and stability are restored soon, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) will likely increase. People are leaving their homes because of the violence in Iraq and while many have sought safety in neighboring countries – as is their right under international law – many are unwilling or unable to leave their country. Although systematic data are lacking, it is likely that those who are internally displaced are even more vulnerable than refugees: IDPs are closer to the conflict which led to their displacement and the provision of humanitarian assistance inside Iraq is extremely difficult. For these reasons I hope that the situation of IDPs inside Iraq will receive the attention it merits. While governments hosting Iraqi refugees are certainly in need of support, the IDPs inside Iraq – though perhaps less ‘visible’ to those of us outside the country than the refugees in neighboring countries – have clear needs which must be addressed, too.

I would like to make three points with respect to IDPs.

First, it is the responsibility of the national government – supported by the international community - to protect and assist its displaced citizens. The Ministry of Displacement and Migration, the Iraqi Red Crescent and a number of courageous Iraqi NGOs have worked hard to assist IDPs, but problems persist. In this regard, I note reports that there have been problems for IDPs to access the Public Distribution System (PDS) on which Iraqis rely for their daily food rations. As a matter of urgency, I would encourage the Iraqi government to take the necessary steps to ensure that people who are displaced from their communities are able to receive food rations in the communities in which they are living. They should not be required to return to their place of origin to re-register for rations and provision should be made for displaced Iraqis who do not have the necessary documentation to have continued access to the PDS.

Secondly, there are reports that some governorates are restricting the entry of IDPs into their communities. While it is true that the arrival of large numbers of IDPs stretches available resources and can create tension with the host communities, I want to emphasize that the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, which were unanimously recognized by the September 2005 World Summit “as an important international framework for the protection of internally displaced persons” provide for the freedom of movement of IDPs within a nation’s borders. People have a fundamental right to seek to escape violence by moving elsewhere within their country. I urge local authorities to consider ways of ensuring that IDPs are not impeded in their efforts to find security and protection within Iraq’s borders. At the same time, recognizing the challenges which the arrival of IDPs pose to local governments, I encourage the Iraqi national authorities and the international community to find ways of increasing the capacity of local authorities to respond to the needs of the IDPs and to relieve the pressures on public services in the host community. Local authorities need to be supported to provide for all those who are living within their jurisdiction, rather than turning away people who are desperately seeking safety.

Finally, reports note that most of the IDPs are renting homes, living with family or friends, or living in abandoned buildings of one kind or another. While most of Iraq’s governorates have set up some kind of camps for the IDPs, less than 1 percent of IDPs are living in them. I urge the authorities to consider the use of camps as a last resort. While IDP camps may have certain benefits – notably in the ability to provide public services to displaced populations -- they also have serious shortcomings. Most notably, given the reality of increasing sectarian violence in Iraq, I am concerned that moving IDPs into camps could give rise to security threats or scapegoating of IDPs who are conveniently grouped together. Camps are also expensive to build and to maintain and may create a dependency syndrome which can be difficult to overcome even when conditions improve. Furthermore, the experience to date with IDP camps in Iraq seems to indicate that camps are not culturally acceptable to most Iraqis and I suggest that alternative possibilities be supported. By allowing IDPs to live within existing communities, their ties with the community are strengthened. Rather than devoting resources to camps, resources could be given to families to allow them to construct an additional room in their home for displaced family members. Communities could be supported to build semi-permanent structures for the displaced and to expand public services in the communities. Given housing shortages in Iraq, these structures could be put to good use in the reconstruction phase. For IDPs for whom living with family members is not an option, the possibility of using non-essential public buildings as temporary shelters could be explored. However, if IDP camps are established, IDPs should not be coerced to live there, either by force or as a precondition for receiving assistance. Moreover, all displaced persons should be eligible for assistance and be given access to available services – even if they choose not to live in camps.

There are many challenges in responding to the needs of Iraq’s internally displaced persons. First, and foremost, ways and means to better protect the civilian population in Iraq against the threats of arbitrary displacement and to hold those responsible for such displacement accountable should be found as a matter of urgency. But until the violence

ends and people are able to return to their communities, the Iraqi government has, as is spelled out in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, the responsibility to ensure that those who were not able to escape forced displacement and remain in Iraq are protected and assisted. I encourage the international community, including UN agencies, to focus their endeavors on the IDPs in Iraq and to seek ways of strongly supporting the Iraqi government's efforts in this regard.