

# War in Iraq will create refugee disaster

A renewed war in Iraq will cause a massive humanitarian and refugee crisis in the Middle East.

At a time when the Howard government is locking up Iraqi asylum seekers in detention centers in Manus Island and Nauru, we should oppose a war that will create a new humanitarian crisis, and force hundreds of thousands of people from their homes.

The United Nations has started moving tens of thousands of tents and blankets to Iran, in readiness for a huge wave of Iraqi refugees who are expected to escape across the border if the US and Britain launch military action to topple the Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein.

Iran has established a Central Crisis Headquarters for possible Iraqi refugees. Iran's Interior Ministry director-general for refugees and foreign nationals says: "The United Nations High Commission for Refugees has announced its preparedness to deliver services for 150,000 people. If America attacks Iraq, about 500,000 Iraqi refugees may move towards Iran's borders and we intend to set up the refugee camps inside Iraq. The Central Crisis HQ has contingency plans for sheltering 150,000 to 900,000 people, and the exact level may fluctuate depending on the nature of the military operations against Iraq." (IRNA news agency, Tehran, 10 Sep 2002).

A war in Iraq will place increasing burdens on neighbouring countries who already host many refugees. Last year, Iran was caring for 203,000 Iraqis and more than 2.36 million Afghans.

Apart from creating a new refugee crisis, a war in Iraq is also likely to put an abrupt end to a cautious refugee and prisoner-of-war return programme which Tehran and Baghdad started early in 2002, almost 14 years after the end of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war.

## Lesson from the 1991 Gulf War

The Gulf War in 1990-91 caused a massive humanitarian crisis, as hundreds of thousands of people fled from the region.

Following Iraq's August 1990 invasion of Kuwait, neighbouring Jordan received 850,000 refugees from Iraq and Kuwait (equivalent to 25 per cent of Jordan's population) as well as the return of 300,000 Jordanian guest workers and 40,000 school-aged children. Over 400,000 Egyptians fled the early stages of fighting, and during the war refugees continued to leave, with tens of thousands crossing into transit and refugee camps in Iran, Turkey, Syria and Jordan.

Today, more than 5,200 refugees remain at Rafha camp in northern Saudi Arabia from a total of more than 33,000 Iraqis housed in the facility when it was set up after the 1991 Gulf war.

Tens of thousands of Kurds fled the repression which followed the 1991 war, and renewed conflict could destroy the safe haven created in the north of Iraq.

## Global effects

Funding refugee aid in the Middle East drains funds urgently needed for refugee assistance in Africa, Asia and Central America. The first day of the 1991 Gulf war cost more than the total annual budget of the UN High Commissioner of Refugees to care for all the refugees in the world.

The flood of refugees from the conflict zone had implications far beyond the Middle East. By late January 2001, more than 160,000 migrant workers had been repatriated to developing countries. Over 85,000 Sri Lankans lost their jobs in the Gulf, whose remittances made up almost half the country's foreign income. Sri Lanka's exports to the Middle East collapsed, forcing the country to take additional IMF loans adding to its massive debt burden.

The loss of income from guest worker remittances reduced Yemen's national income by more than 10 per cent. A similar pattern developed in countries as far afield as Bangladesh, Vietnam, Sudan and the Philippines, which had many guestworkers in the Gulf region. The Bangladesh Foreign Minister estimated the total loss to his country at US\$400-500 million.

## "Pacific Solution" is no solution

The Australian government continues to detain people from Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries who are fleeing war, human rights abuses and economic disaster.

In October 2002, there are still 903 refugees and asylum seekers detained on Nauru and 102 on Manus Island.

Under the so-called "Pacific Solution", the Howard government's 2002 budget estimates spending of \$430 million over the next four years for offshore asylum processing in Pacific island countries.

Even though the government stated that none of the "Pacific Solution" refugees would come to Australia, 249 have been slipped into the country with little publicity, under family reunion schemes.

A significant majority of the Iraqi asylum applicants on Manus and Nauru have been granted refugee status on their initial application. By July 2002, 76 per cent of Iraqis on Manus and 59 per cent on Nauru were granted refugee status, with numbers increasing after review and appeal.

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