

Iraqis returning home outnumber displaced for first time since 2013, says UN migration agency

12 January 2018 – The number of Iraqis returning to their area of origin has surpassed those internally displaced for the first time since December 2013, when the country became engulfed in conflict with the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh), the United Nations migration agency said Friday.

“Iraqis who remain displaced are among the most vulnerable, as they [face obstacles to return](#), including damage or destruction of their home and local infrastructure, financial limitations and other constraints,” said Gerard Waite, chief of the International Organization for Migration ([IOM](#)) mission in Iraq.

Over the past four years, the country has been deeply affected by the conflict with Iraq's victory over the ISIL, which led to the displacement of nearly six million people, IOM stated.

On 9 December, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced Iraq's victory over ISIL and by the end of the year, IOM had identified 3.2 million people who had returned back to their place of origin – while a staggering 2.6 million remained displaced.

Following improved security in retaken areas, a sizable number of internally displaced people (IDPs) have returned home to mainly the three governorates worst affected by ISIL's occupation, accounting for 86 per cent of displaced Iraqis. More than 1.2 million people returned to the governorate of Anbar; nearly 975,000 to Ninewa; and close to 460,000 to Salah al-Din.

Shortly after the operation to retake Mosul was launched in October 2016, IOM constructed two emergency displacement sites, one in Haj Ali and one in Qayara.

With a combined capacity to shelter 110,000 IDPs, these sites were constructed in partnership with Iraq's Ministry of Migration and Displacement in the southeast of Ninewa governorate. The more than 71,000 internally displaced persons remaining there receive relief kits, medical services and psychosocial support from IOM, and other services from humanitarian partners.

IOM pointed out that 57 per cent of IDPs are currently in Ninewa, which has an intra-governorate IDP people population of 97 per cent.

Intra-governorate returns account for 55 per cent of returnees, a common trend across the most-affected governorates that is likely to continue.

[UN rights office urges Tunisian authorities to ensure freedom of peaceful assembly](#)

12 January 2018 – The United Nations human rights office on Friday called on the authorities in Tunisia to ensure that protestors are not arrested in an arbitrary manner, and that all those detained are treated with full respect for their due process rights and other fundamental guarantees.

“We are closely [watching the demonstrations](#) across Tunisia and the authorities’ response to them,” Rupert Colville, spokesperson of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), told reporters in Geneva, Switzerland, expressing concern about the high number of arrests – 778 people since Monday, some 200 of them between the ages of 15 and 20.

“The authorities must ensure that those exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are not prevented from doing so,” he stressed.

Ahead of the 14 January anniversary of the 2011 revolution, it is particularly important to ensure that demonstrators are able to protest peacefully.

Those taking to the streets should exercise restraint and calm, Mr. Colville said. There has been looting, vandalism and violence, including damage to police stations and shops but peaceful demonstrators must not be held responsible or penalised for the violent acts of others, he added.

The UN human rights office urges all sides to work together towards resolving, with full respect for human rights, the economic and social problems underpinning the unrest, he said.

[Boko Haram attacks, human trafficking threaten progress in West Africa and Sahel – UN envoy](#)

11 January 2018 – The security situation in West Africa and the Sahel remains of grave concern, the United Nations envoy for the region said Thursday,

warning that while there had been progress on the political front over the past year, there had also been a worrying upsurge in Boko Haram attacks.

“Following a notable decline in Boko Haram attacks in the first half of the year, there has been an uptick in the number of incidents since September last year, with a peak of 143 civilian casualties alone in November 2017,” [said](#) Mohamed Ibn Chambas, Special Representative and Head of the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS).

In his [report](#) a fivefold increase in the use of children as suicide bombers by Boko Haram, reaching some 135 cases in 2017.

Updating the Council on Mali, he said that terrorists launched a complex attack on the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission’s ([MINUSMA](#)) positions in Kidal, which resulted in one peacekeeper’s death, while three Malian soldiers were killed by a landmine and another by terrorists in Niono. Additionally, two separate attacks on security posts were registered in Burkina Faso near the Malian border.

“The attacks in Mali as well as within the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso tri-border area are mainly attributed to Al-Qaida affiliated groups and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara,” he stated.

Turning to Niger, he noted that because of an increasing number of security incidents, the government has dedicated 17 per cent of 2018 public expenditure to the security sector – compared to 15 per cent last year.

“This has, however, triggered demonstrations in Niger’s capital given the expected detrimental effects on the delivery of social services,” he asserted.

The UN envoy pointed out that while 700 Boko Haram abductees have recently escaped, the group continues to kidnap people and that, overall, more than two million displaced persons “desperately” await an end to the Lake Chad Basin crisis.

Commending the efforts of the Multinational Joint Task Force operating in the region, he stressed that the comprehensive response of the region to address the Boko Haram threat “must be supported by the international community.”

The past six months have seen substantive progress in the efforts to reinvigorate the Integrated Strategy for the Sahel UN envoy for West Africa and the Sahel

He explained that in the Sahel, the Group of Five (G5) – Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger – had made significant progress in operationalizing its Joint Force, including by establishing its military command structure and Force headquarters in Sevarey and conducting its first military operation with French troops in late October.

Additionally, in line with Security Council resolution [2391](#) (2017),

consultations among the UN, European Union (EU) and G5 are ongoing regarding the conclusion of a technical agreement on supporting the Joint Force through MINUSMA.

“The past six months have seen substantive progress in the efforts to reinvigorate UNISS,” he said, noting that a support plan would be shared with national, regional and international partners to harmonize approaches and canvass for effective support to the Sahel “in line with national and regional priorities, the UN Agenda 2030 and the AU Agenda 2063.”

Meanwhile, he noted that migration has become one of the most lucrative activities for criminal networks across West Africa and the Sahel.

“Stemming human trafficking must continue to be a top priority in 2018 as recently underscored by Secretary-General Guterres,” he affirmed.

[In Damascus, UN aid chief outlines measures to improve response to Syrian crisis in 2018](#)

11 January 2018 – After seven years of bloody conflict, the Syrian war has wreaked a “colossal toll” on the country and its people, the United Nations relief chief said on Thursday from the capital, Damascus, where he outlined ways to sustain and improve humanitarian assistance and protection for everyone affected by the crisis this year.

“I have this week [seen first hand](#) the colossal toll that the brutal and sustained hostilities have taken,” said Mark Lowcock, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, in a statement to the media on the third day of his visit to Syria.

Describing the dire situation, he said estimates suggest that hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, countless more are missing or detained, and five million have fled to other countries. Gross domestic product (GDP) is less than half what it was before the war, and replacing destroyed infrastructure and housing will cost hundreds of billions of dollars.

“Almost 70 per cent of people now live in extreme poverty,” said Mr. Lowcock.

Against this background, he paid tribute to the thousands of aid workers that have worked to implement assistance programmes, explaining: “Most of them are Syrians and many are volunteers, working for the organizations of the UN, the Red Cross, [non-governmental organizations] and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent.”

While in Syria, Mr. Lowcock, who is also the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, said he has had open discussions with the Government about the crisis and what more needs to be done to reduce humanitarian suffering, and has also met local authorities, the diplomatic community and humanitarian organizations.

The UN relief wing has more on the Syria crisis [here](#)

He said he is hoping soon to see “a number of positive developments” that enable the UN to sustain and improve the aid effort this year.

Such developments would include finalization of the UN’s humanitarian response plan for 2018, which seeks \$3.5 billion from donors to meet the needs of more than 13 million people in all parts of Syria, as well as agreement to medical evacuation for hundreds of critically ill people trapped in besieged Eastern Ghouta.

The UN’s humanitarian response plan for Syria, which targets some 13 million people and is one of the world’s largest sustained emergency aid efforts, totalled \$1.7 billion in 2017.

Also, agreement to three or four UN and Syrian Arab Red Crescent convoys each week across front lines would provide assistance to up to 2.5 million people in besieged and hard to reach areas.

Further, the aid effort could be improved through agreement on UN-supported convoys from Damascus to Rukban in south-eastern Syria, and more effective arrangements to enable the UN to support the work of Syrian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and to enable international NGOs to play a stronger role in relieving the suffering.

Mr. Lowcock said he also discussed with the Government and others a number of other issues, including the review of the cross-border aid programmes from neighbouring countries into Syria which was commissioned last month by the Security Council.

“My mandate is to ensure humanitarian assistance and protection for everyone who needs it, in accordance with the long-established principles of independence, impartiality and neutrality which have been endorsed by all the Member States of the UN,” he said.

[In Hargeisa, UN envoy for Somalia calls for calm and dialogue following](#)

clashes

11 January 2018 – The top United Nations envoy for Somalia has called for calm and dialogue amid reports of clashes between security forces from ‘Somaliland’ and neighbouring Puntland.

“Our position is to try and reduce tensions [and] to increase dialogue very quickly between both sides, so that if there are misunderstandings, these are clarified,” [said](#) the UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Somalia, Michael Keating, while in Hargeisa, the capital of ‘Somaliland.’

“If there are genuine differences, then they have to be subject to immediate discussion,” he added. “But resorting to military solutions and to violence is not the way to resolve these problems.”

The UN envoy was speaking at a joint press encounter yesterday with ‘Somaliland’s’ Foreign Minister, Saad Ali Shire, after having met with ‘Somaliland’s’ President Muse Bihi Abdi – their first meeting since the latter was elected late last year.

Earlier this week, there were reports of clashes between security forces in the Sool region, part of a disputed area claimed by both ‘Somaliland’ and Puntland, located on the north-eastern tip of the Horn of Africa.

In their meeting, Mr. Keating and Mr. Bihi Abdi discussed the new government’s priorities, as well as the latest security issues.

“I was very impressed by and grateful to the President for his commitment, borne from his many decades of personal experience, of the importance of finding peaceful solutions to problems, “ he said, “and that a priority must be to try and prevent violence of any kind, whether in ‘Somaliland,’ or, indeed, between ‘Somaliland’ and others.”

While in Hargeisa, the UN envoy also met with several cabinet ministers to discuss various topics, including education, health, security, the impact of drought and employment, and how the United Nations can best provide support in addressing humanitarian and development challenges in these areas. Similar meetings were subsequently held with civil society representatives.

Part of the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia ([UNSOM](#)) – which Mr. Keating also heads and which has an office in Hargeisa – is to support ‘Somaliland’ efforts towards a politically stable and democratic system that adheres to the principles of good governance.



UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Somalia, Michael Keating, views some of the ancient rock art at Laas Geel, located near the capital of Hargeisa, Somaliland. The paintings are estimated to date from somewhere between 3,000 and 9,000 BC and are some of the earliest cave paintings to have been found in the Horn of Africa. UN Photo/Tobin Jones



A close-up of the Neolithic paintings at the Laas Geel rock art site, located some 50km outside of Hargeisa in Somaliland, The paintings are estimated to date from somewhere between 3,000 and 9,000 BC and are some of the earliest cave paintings to have been found in the Horn of Africa.UN Photo/Tobin Jones



A local guide shows the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Somalia, Michael Keating, some of the ancient rock art at Laas Geel, located near the capital of Hargeisa, Somaliland. UN Photo/Tobin Jones



UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Somalia, Michael Keating (right), meets with President of Somaliland, Muse Bidi Abdi and others at the start of a meeting in his offices in Hargeisa, Somaliland. UN Photo/Tobin Jones



UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Somalia, Michael Keating, walks with representatives of the Somaliland government on his way to meet with the Minister of Interior, Mohamed Kahin Ahmed, in Hargeisa. UN Photo/Tobin Jones



UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Somalia, Michael Keating, attends a meeting with cabinet ministers at the office of the Somaliland's Minister of Interior, Mohamed Kahin Ahmed, in Hargeisa, Somaliland,. UN Photo/Tobin Jones

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Visit to Laas Geel highlights rich heritage and economic potential

The Special Representative also visited the Laas Geel rock shelters, located an hour north-east of Hargeisia, and the location of Neolithic paintings dating back several thousands of years.

“One of the reasons I wanted to come here is because it’s good to be reminded that [while] the image of this part of the world is about conflict and so much despair and suffering, and yet it’s also one of the cradles of civilization,” Mr. Keating said.

“So while it’s a resource for the world, it’s also very important for Somalis to know that they are living in a land with great history and traditions and that is changing and is dynamic,” he added.

French researchers came across the site during an archaeological survey of the area in 2002, and it is considered to be one of the oldest rock art sites in Africa and the most important ancient site in ‘Somaliland.’ The paintings depict wild animals, decorated cattle and herders.

According to local authorities, up to 200 hundred visitors, from the region and abroad, make the trek to the site each month, despite access difficulties and concerns over security.

“That would suggest that the potential is indeed enormous, and not just limited to rock caves, “ said Mr. Keating. “There’s the natural environment, the coast and the beaches are incredible, the potential for tourism is enormous.”

There have been concerns over recent years that the site’s paintings are under threat of serious deterioration from their exposure to the elements as well as local animals.

The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)) sent a team to review the site in 2016. It has made recommendations on how to best safeguard it, and is working with local authorities on putting those measures in place.