

IRAQ | UNHCR COVID-19 UPDATE VIII

COUNTRY SITUATION *confirmed cases in Iraq: 2,913 | confirmed cases affecting UNHCR persons of concern: 1*

During the last week, the COVID-19 infection rate throughout Iraq's central and southern governorates has slightly increased. As of 12 May, there are 2,913 confirmed cases across the country, an increase of close to 400 cases compared to last week, with 112 fatalities, most of which in Baghdad, Basrah, and Kerbala.

While over 125,000 tests have been conducted to date, and the situation remains stable, federal authorities have raised concerns in the past days over the increasing rate of infection in central and southern governorates. A different trend is being observed in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I), where the infection rate continues to decrease. In federal Iraq, the Minister of Health and Environment has recently stated that if the rate of contagion continues to increase, full comprehensive curfew measures may need to be re-applied. For the time being, the Crisis Management Cell has decided to change the curfew hours already in place from 5AM to 5PM during weekdays, instead of 6AM to 6PM. Total curfew remains in place on Fridays and Saturdays. In addition, authorities have announced that full lockdown will be instituted during Eid al-Fitr, expected to be either on the 23 or 24 May, and have further stressed the need for all citizens to respect the current measures, particularly wearing masks in the street and workplaces, and refraining from attending social, religious, and cultural gatherings. Airports throughout Iraq will remain closed to commercial travel until 22 May.

The situation in KR-I is different, with a decreasing infection rate, the Kurdistan Regional Government has decided to lighten the measures in place extensively. Since Monday 11, the evening curfew has been lifted, and mosques, churches, restaurants, shops, and gyms are open. Government offices are gradually resuming their activity, and only travel restrictions between governorates and to enter KR-I remain strict along with the limitation of big gatherings such as funerals, weddings, and celebrations.

COVID-19 PROTECTION RISKS AND CHALLENGES

Protection risks mentioned in previous updates still persist including the **closure of borders preventing movement of refugees, challenges to access camps and reach persons of concern in certain locations, lack of livelihood opportunities, increased prices of basic food items, the rise of domestic violence, increased risk of eviction due to the socioeconomic impact of movement restrictions, and halt of education activities.**

As movement restriction measures start to be eased in certain locations, there is an increasing concern over the exert of pressure on IDPs to return to their areas of origin before conditions are conducive to do so. Taking into consideration the coercive nature of some of those returns, and the disregard of COVID-19 preventive measures. During the past week, a series of coerced returns have been reported in Anbar Governorate, and local authorities in Salah al-Din and Ninewa have expressed their intention to resume IDP return movements. Humanitarian partners have further reported that in certain recent return movements, measures to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 were not respected, including lack of social distancing and availability of masks for vulnerable individuals. UNHCR continues to advocate for returns to be voluntary, informed, in safety, and dignity.

ONGOING DISTRIBUTION OF COVID-19 SPECIFIC ASSISTANCE

UNHCR continues to support families' access to basic hygiene items through the distribution of cash assistance and sanitary kits, as part of its efforts to limit the spread of the virus and preserve the well-being of refugees, IDPs, and returnees across Iraq. To date, over 10,965 refugee families and 13,372 IDP families have benefitted from the cash assistance. The distribution is being conducted either door-to-door or in distribution centres while ensuring respect for social distancing and avoiding mass gatherings. UNHCR aims to assist over 125,000 vulnerable displaced families; through this intervention, provided funding is available. Further to the cash assistance, UNHCR has distributed to date over 26,500 dignity kits for women and girls of reproductive age living in IDP and refugee camps. These kits contain Hygiene and sanitary items such as soaps, pads, and underwear.

UNHCR OVERALL RESPONSE

UNHCR maintains regular contact with national and governorate health authorities and has ensured the inclusion of all persons of concern in national COVID-19 preparedness and response plans. At the moment, public health facilities throughout the country continue offering services to all affected cases. Should pressure increase for public health facilities, UNHCR has developed a contingency plan to ensure continuity of delivery of all critical life-saving services and assistance to all vulnerable displaced individuals across the country, particularly in refugee and IDP camps. UNHCR has well established procedures to continue providing services and maintain a presence in the field in challenging situations. Under the current context, most basic services continue to function (albeit at limited capacity) in camps and areas with a high density of displaced populations. UNHCR has adopted new distribution modalities to ensure assistance continues to be delivered, including door-to-door and telephone modalities for cash support, legal counselling, protection monitoring, and other activities.



Awareness raising in refugee camps in Duhok

Beyond regular activities, in its efforts to limit the spread of the virus and preserve the well-being of vulnerable displaced families in Iraq, UNHCR continues to implement a series of measures across the country including dissemination of guidance and fact-based information on prevention measures through health promotion and awareness activities; improvement of access to basic hygiene items; provision of medical Protective Personnel Equipment (PPE) for staff at borders and in camps; disinfection of public areas in camps; and training of health workers on the early case definition and detection, among others.

FUNDING NEEDS

As part of the broader UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan, UNHCR has issued an Emergency Appeal requesting US\$745 million for life-saving interventions in response to COVID-19. As the pandemic accelerated, our long-standing partners in the international community have stepped up with vital funding, allowing us to scale-up activities on a global scale.

As part of the Global Emergency Appeal, **UNHCR in Iraq is urgently appealing for US\$36 million** to scale-up its activities in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Since the launch of the appeal, UNHCR Iraq has received generous contributions of US\$ 6.5 million from the Government of the United States of America and US\$1.5 million from the Government of Japan. UNHCR is immensely grateful for their swift support to the COVID-19 response.

At this time, UNHCR also appeals strongly to donors not to deprioritize funding for regular programmes. Humanitarian action to save lives and alleviate the suffering of vulnerable populations remains imperative.

Special thanks to major donors of un-earmarked and broadly earmarked funds as well as donors who have contributed directly to Iraq operation in 2020 (as of 8 May)

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