

Iraq: Women struggle to make ends meet

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS (ICRC) HAS BEEN WORKING IN IRAQ CONTINUOUSLY SINCE 1980 RESPONDING TO THE CONSEQUENCES OF ARMED CONFLICTS

Overview

A great many women in Iraq are facing challenges in the task of caring for their families, earning income and taking part in community and professional life. Since widespread violence erupted in 2003, they have been increasingly caught in the crossfire, killed, wounded or driven from their homes. As their menfolk have been killed or taken away in large numbers, the entire burden of running the household has been suddenly thrust upon them.

"Regardless of the circumstance of loss, the mere fact that there is no traditional breadwinner directly affects the family's financial situation," says Caroline Douilliez, head of the ICRC's Women and War programme in Iraq. "The ICRC's observations across Iraq have led us to the distressing conclusion that the lack of regular and sufficient income over the years has cast a huge number of families into severe poverty."

According to ICRC estimates, between one and two million households in Iraq today are headed by women. This figure includes women whose husbands are either dead, missing (some since as far back as 1980) or detained. Divorced women are also taken into account. All these women were wives at one point in time, and today remain mothers to their children and daughters to their parents, and sometimes ultimately breadwinners and caregivers for all these people. Without a male relative, they lack economic, physical and social protection and support. Often they struggle with harrowing memories of the circumstance of death or disappearance of their husband. Displaced women face the added challenge of coping with the loss of a home that they had to leave because of threats to their safety, or for lack of income.

"With no job opportunities, with no help from relatives themselves too poor to provide it, and with no assistance from the state social-security system, these women's daily struggle revolves around putting food on the table and paying for shelter, schooling and medical care", Douilliez says. "Sometimes their only option is to take their young boys out of school and send them out to earn a few dinars for the family. As a result, future generations pay the price of today's difficult times. Without a proper education, today's youth will not be equipped to face their own challenges once they have families of their own."

In response to this emergency, the ICRC has launched programmes aimed specifically to assist women heading households alone. Since 2008, the organization has focused on finding ways to help women attain self-sufficiency.

At the same time, the ICRC closely follows-up the effects of efforts of the State to improve public support (social welfare benefit) for women facing particular hardship. The ICRC can attest to the struggle required to increase budgetary allocations and resources for this vulnerable group. Douilliez stresses the scale of the problem and the need for a comprehensive approach by the Iraqi government.

The ICRC is engaged in dialogue with parliamentarians and other central and provincial policy-makers to ensure that the social welfare system for vulnerable women receives the resources it needs.



Najaf: Livestock project supported by ICRC



Basra: Widow runs a small shop with the support of ICRC MEI.



Najaf: A Tailor benefited from ICRC MEI projects for women-headed households

Relief assistance: Between 2009 and 2010 the ICRC assisted around 4000 women heading households who have been displaced from their homes. Food parcels and hygienic items were distributed to women in Baghdad, Diyala and Ninawa governorates.

Micro Economic Initiatives (MEI): The ICRC provides in-kind grants to help finance income generating projects, extended to women who are capable and willing to run a project. Often home-based, such as small shops, trade projects, food production, these projects are conducted in partnership with local NGOs and monitored for several months to ensure sustainability. Projects have been initiated since 2009 in Najaf, Basra, Missan and Baghdad.

Welfare allowance project: The ICRC assists women with the formalities associated to applying for welfare allowance provided by the Directorate of Women Social Care. As the cost of travel to gather documents is high for women who have very limited resources, the ICRC in partnership with local NGOs, advises on the process and reimburses travel costs for women who have never applied for this allowance, in Baghdad, Anbar, Basra and Missan. The ICRC has also provided some technical support to the administration in charge.

Bringing aid to people facing hardship

The ICRC maintained its support of people struggling to earn a living, such as women heading households, people with disabilities and the displaced. During the months of January and February, the ICRC:

- provided emergency winter assistance for more than 44,000 displaced people in Ninawa, Kirkuk, Diyala, Baghdad, Wassit, Babil, Anbar, Salah Al-Din, Dohuk and Sulaimaniya.
- awarded 82 grants to disabled people and women heading households in Baghdad, Kirkuk, Ninawa, Sulaimaniya and Erbil to enable them to start small businesses and regain economic self-sufficiency. Around 900 households headed by women and the disabled received such assistance since 2008, benefiting a total of more than 5,000 people.

Assisting hospitals and physical rehabilitation centres

Health-care services in some rural and conflict-prone areas are still struggling to meet the needs of the civilian population. In this vein the ICRC continues to help renovate the premises of health-care facilities and train staff.

In helping the disabled reintegrate into the community, ICRC continues to provide limb-fitting and physical rehabilitation services. In January and February:

- 192 new patients were fitted with prostheses and 1,010 with orthoses at 10 ICRC-supported centres throughout Iraq;
- 17 doctors and 44 nurses took part in a course given in Sulaimaniya and Najaf for medical personnel from Koya, Erbil, Dohuk, Khanaqin, Sulaimaniya, Kirkuk, Babil, Muthanna, Diwaniya, Kerbala and Najaf, intended to strengthen emergency services.

In 2010 the ICRC began providing on-site support to eight Primary Health Care Centres in Diyala, Ninawa, Kirkuk, Babil and Diwaniya. By agreement with the local authorities, ICRC visits the centres on a regular basis to maintain and where necessary upgrade water supply networks. ICRC also provides advice for emergency stabilization and referral services and provides advice on consultations for women and children. It also supports local health administrations in order to ensure the stock of medicines and vaccines is adequate and available in regular supply.

Over 280,000 inhabitants including IDPs, now have better access to basic health care and emergency services in the eight Primary Health Care Centres above listed. By mid 2010, these centres started receiving more comprehensive ICRC on-site support focusing on strengthening hygiene and universal precaution, drug management, emergency services and adequate care for women and children, as well as structural improvements. The local health authorities appointed additional female doctors and material (as ambulances, beds) to some facilities.

Providing clean water and sanitation

Access to clean water remains difficult in much of Iraq. ICRC engineers continue to repair and upgrade water, electrical and sanitary facilities, especially in places where violence remains a concern and in rural areas, to improve the quality of services provided in communities and health-care facilities. In January and February, these activities included:

Emergency assistance:

The ICRC delivered water by truck:

- to al-Sadr City (sectors 52 and 53), Husseinia and Ma'amil area in Baghdad governorate to over 4,840 internally displaced people;
- to al-Zeidan Primary Health Care Centre in Abu Ghraib, Baghdad Governorate

Support for health-care facilities:

The ICRC completed the following works:

- Upgrading the water storage capacity in al-Shirqat General Hospital (100-bed capacity) in Salah al-Din governorate.
- Rehabilitation of the sanitation blocks of 3 buildings (Zainab, al Kindy and al Razi) in al-Rashad Psychiatric Hospital Phase 2 Stage 2 (1,300-bed capacity) in Baghdad governorate.
- Rehabilitation of a Primary Health Care Centre in al-Sadr City (receiving 300 patients per day), Baghdad governorate. The Centre serves a catchment area of 50,000 people.
- Installation of a 40kw UPS for the operating theatre sterilizer of al-Sadr Teaching Hospital (200 bed capacity), Najaf governorate.

Drinking-water supply:

The ICRC completed 10 main projects benefiting over 612,250 people throughout the country:

- Renovation of Qaim water treatment plant (600m³/hr) in Anbar governorate, serving about 170,000 people.
- Rehabilitation of al-Samadiyah compact unit (200m³/h) in Za'faraniya, Baghdad governorate, serving about 200,000 people.
- Removal and reinstallation of a compact unit from al-Quds to al-Rasheed in Baghdad governorate, serving about 15,000 people.
- Upgrade of five compact units in Abu Ghraib district Baghdad governorate, serving about 74,000 people.

- Rehabilitation al-Jirnaf compact unit (200m³/h) in al-Shirqat, Salah al-Din governorate, serving about 20,000 people.
- Rehabilitation of Khan Bani Saad compact unit (400m³/h) in Diyala governorate, serving about 40,000 people.
- Supplying a generator for Mendili and Qaratapa water treatment plants in Diyala governorate, serving about 42,000 people.
- Water supply implementation in Qosh villages, in Ninawa serving about 45,000 people.
- Bakhtiari water supply implementation in Khanaqin, Diyala governorate, serving about 6,000 people.
- Rehabilitation of Al-Tumama compact unit in Missan governorate, serving about 250 people.

Rehabilitation of infrastructure, water and sewage systems in places of detention:

- Electro-mechanical works completed in Kadhimiya maximum security prison in Baghdad governorate.
- Improvement of the women's yard in Hilla Prison (no. 2), Babil governorate, serving about 50 detainees.

Visiting detainees

In January and February, ICRC delegates visited detainees held by the Iraqi Correctional Service under the authority of the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of the Interior, various branches of the Kurdish Regional Government and the United States government in 27 places of detention in 14 governorates. The delegates monitored the conditions in which detainees were being held and the treatment they received.



Sulaimaniya: ICRC delegate distributing Red Cross messages in Fort Suze prison

The ICRC shared its observations and recommendations with the detaining authorities with a view to bringing about improvements where needed.

In some of the places of detention, the ICRC gave detainees mattresses, blankets and recreational items such as books and games.

The ICRC makes a special effort to restore and maintain ties between people held in detention facilities and their loved ones. In January and February over 350 Red Cross messages were exchanged between detainees and their families in Iraq and abroad. The ICRC also responded to over 750 enquiries from families seeking information on detained relatives or requesting other types of information, for instance on missing relatives. In addition, the ICRC in Iraq and in Iran and Kuwait issued close to 1,000 certificates of detention to former detainees and prisoners of war from previous international armed conflicts. The voluntary repatriation of 2 released detainees took place under the auspices of the ICRC. The organization also issued travel documents to 13 persons, mainly refugees, to enable them to resettle abroad. In February, the ICRC in Iraq and Kuwait facilitated a 3-day visit for 7 Iraqi families (19 persons) to visit their loved ones detained in Kuwait Central Prison.

Clarifying the fate of missing people

During the months of January and February, the ICRC, in its role as a neutral intermediary, chaired a meeting between Iraq and Iran during which joint field work in view of recovering the remains of soldiers killed during the Iran-Iraq War was discussed. It also chaired one meeting of the Technical Sub-Committee dealing with missing persons from the Gulf War and participated in technical meetings with the concerned parties, in view of preparing joint field exhumations.

The human remains of 38 presumed Iraqi soldiers killed during the Iran-Iraq war were handed over from the Iranian to the Iraqi authorities under ICRC auspices.

ICRC Mission The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. It directs and coordinates the international activities conducted by the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence.



The ICRC continued to provide the Iraqi Ministry of Human Rights and Baghdad's Medical-Legal Institute with the technical support they require to exchange information and build up their capacity in the area of forensics. In this regard, in January, the ICRC provided Forensic Anthropology training for 27 members of the Medico-Legal Institute (MLI) in Baghdad.

Promoting compliance with international humanitarian law

Reminding parties to a conflict of their obligation to protect civilians is a fundamental part of the ICRC's work. The organization also endeavours to spread knowledge of international humanitarian law by organizing presentations for various audiences, including military personnel, prison staff, students and professors.

In January and February, dissemination sessions on international humanitarian law were organized for the 53 members of the Iraqi Army and eight members of the Peshmerga IHL Committee. One Train-the-Trainer workshop was held for 37 members of the Iraqi Army at the Center for Military Values, Principles and Leadership Development.