

## Delegates

I am privileged to work in Iraq as the representative of the High Commissioner for Human Rights where the situation is particularly dire in relation to the protection of civilians owing to on-going armed violence and terrorism.

The Iraqi population is extremely diverse in terms of ethnicity and religion. The three larger groups are Kurds, Shi'a Arabs and Sunni Arabs, but Iraq also has communities of Turkomen, Yezidi, Shabaks, Armenians, Baha'is, Black Iraqis, Chaldo-Assyrians and other Christians, Circassians, Faili Kurds, Jews, Kaka'i, Palestinians, Kawliyah, and Sabian Mandeans. Minorities are found all throughout Iraqi territory; while the majority are in the borderland areas between the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the rest of the country, they are found also around Khanaqin, Baghdad, and in areas of the south of the country, such as Basra.

Currently, the so-called "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" or "ISIL" with its extremist *takfiri* doctrine has perpetrated gross and systematic violations of human rights against all Iraq's people that have amounted to crimes against humanity, war crimes, and possibly genocide. ISIL has directly and systematically targeted Iraq's various diverse ethnic and religious communities for a range of serious human rights violations and crimes, including the direct targeting of civilians in conduct of operations, murder, physical and sexual assault, robbery, wanton destruction of property, destruction of places of religious or cultural significance, forced conversions, denial of access to basic humanitarian services, and forced expulsions. ISIL's actions appear to be part of a deliberate and systematic policy that aims to suppress, permanently expel, or in some instances, destroy those communities within areas of its control. There are currently 1.8 to 2 million Iraqi citizens, many of them members of Iraq's minority communities, who have been internally displaced and whose humanitarian situation remains of critical importance – as does saving the lives of those who continue to suffer in areas under the control of the Da'esh. ISIL and its actions, if not quickly stemmed, risks the permanent destruction of diverse ethnic and religious communities, not just in Iraq but in large areas of the Middle East.

The origins of the current conflict in Iraq are longstanding and very complex.

Iraq has suffered from years of despotic regimes, conflict and systemic human rights violations. The crimes of the previous regime have been well documented. Sanctions in the 1990s and the policies of Saddam's regime saw increasing poverty and deterioration in the access of many ordinary Iraqis to basic services – particularly among the non-empowered ethnic and religious communities. For the past ten years Iraq has been subject to war, occupation and armed violence and terrorism. Relations between diverse communities have been fractured and many see themselves as the victims of atrocities and violations committed by other groups. As a result trust between the various communities remains low.

Throughout this time, Iraq's ethnic and religious communities have suffered from direct attacks, killings, kidnappings, destruction of property and other acts of terrorism and violence from extremist religious based armed groups, particularly by what was known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq – the predecessor of ISIL. As their insecurity has increased, coupled with lack of economic opportunity and lack of access to basic services, large numbers of minority communities in Iraq have relocated within the country or have emigrated permanently.

The institutions of the State remain weak – and their lack of capacity to coordinate access to basic services has meant unequal access to those services by various communities within Iraq, particularly for the ethnic and religious communities located in the areas between the Kurdistan region of Iraq and the rest of the country. There is high unemployment among youth in Iraq. There is a generation of young people who have missed out on basic education and who lack basic skills.

Some sectors of the community have felt increasingly alienated from the political processes – believing that democratic institutions have failed to address their grievances.

There is also the conflict in Syria, which has provided fertile ground for extremist groups to arm and train and from where they could relaunch their activities in Iraq.

Many of these factors were indicators of a potential deterioration that could lead to atrocity crimes. Close monitoring and early warning mechanisms are critical to alerting not only the Government but also the international community so that corrective or remedial actions can be

taken - or that in the event of crisis, an appropriate and properly coordinated response can be mounted quickly.

The Human Rights Office of United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, has been closely monitoring the human rights situation in Iraq for many years. We produce regular reports to our interlocutors in the Government of Iraq, within the UN system, to members of the international community, and publicly. Until recently, the situation in Iraq, including the on-going armed violence and terrorism, was viewed as problematic and concerning, but the general consensus of opinion among most interlocutors was that a situation of low intensity violence might continue for some time. Perhaps no one could envisage the emergence of a group like ISIL and its murderous policies.

However, from the beginning of 2014, our office began to systematically raise the alert level in relation to the deterioration of the security situation in Iraq and the potential for radically increased violence with the growing threat of ISIL and concerns for potential widespread human rights violations along the pattern of what was happening in Syria. Despite information, readily apparent following ISIL's sweep into Ninewa and the fall of Mosul, suggesting that the Iraqi security forces did not have the capacity to mount an effective security response to the threat posed by ISIL, and that the resources and capacity of government institutions to meet a growing humanitarian crisis were insufficient, some interlocutors within the Government, but particularly among the international community, persisted in the view that the crisis facing the country was something that the Government of Iraq could, and should, deal with.

It was only with ISIL's second advance into areas of Sinjar and Tal Afar in Ninewa Governorate, the overwhelming evidence of mass slaughter threatening the diverse ethnic and religious communities and mass displacement that the international community became fully cognizant of how dire the situation in Iraq had become, and the clear and present danger posed by ISIL not only to Iraq but to the region as a whole.

This demonstrates the need for a number of things: better coordination of the information flow between UN agencies operating on the ground, with the Government, and with the international community, but also the need for political will among the international community to address

crises, preferably before they happen, but definitely at the onset of a crisis. I am hopeful that the Rights up Front Policy will assist the UN in better coordinating its early mechanisms, but this needs to be matched by complete adherence to the Responsibility to Protect doctrine by the international community. Action once a crisis occurs is paramount, but action to prevent the crisis in the first place, and to save lives and spare men women and children from resulting misery and suffering, is critical.

Another lesson is the fact that there has never been a sustained programme of transitional justice or community reconciliation involving the grass roots of the Iraqi people. Previous Governments had attempted to address some of the issues – but they were never in a coherent or holistic manner. Many programmes run by the international community merely addressed the symptoms of what was happening, without really addressing the root causes. The sense of victimisation that many individuals and communities feel has not been addressed.

Hence it is clear how important in the context of Iraq it was, and it remains, to address the relationships between the various ethnic and religious communities and to ensure the implementation of programmes and policies that promote their full and equal participation in the political, social and economic life of the country.

Ensuring representation at all levels of political and policy decision-making, access to basic services, reforming the education curricula to promote tolerance and understanding between communities, representation in the media, and improving access to justice are just some of the many areas that need to be addressed.

This is something that the UN and the international community can meaningfully support the Government and people of Iraq to achieve.

I thank you.

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