

Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Senator Robert P. Casey, Jr.
Opening Statement for the Hearing entitled
“The Return and Resettlement of Displaced Iraqis”
March 31, 2009

Today, the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs meets to examine the crisis concerning Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), one of the tragic humanitarian consequences of America’s war in Iraq. The purpose of this hearing is to determine the efforts being taken by the Iraqi government, the United States and the rest of the international community to facilitate the resettlement of Iraqis displaced internally, and the repatriation of Iraqi refugees living in neighboring countries. The presence of such a large population in a state of displacement not only has humanitarian consequences, but poses security risks to future Iraqi stability and the interests of neighboring states and the international community. Accordingly, as the United States begins to draw down its military presence in Iraq, we have a both a moral and a security interest in ensuring the safety and welfare of Iraqi refugees and IDPs.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 4.7 million Iraqis have been forced to leave their homes. Approximately 2.7 million are displaced internally, while 2 million have fled to neighboring states, particularly Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. Indeed, these numbers have been called into dispute, and I invite the views of our witnesses today on whether they are too high or too low. The Iraqi government has demonstrated an inability to deal with a problem of such magnitude. Declining oil revenues and institutional deficiencies are preventing the government from effectively addressing this issue. In spite of improved security conditions, displaced Iraqis who return home are confronted with deplorable living conditions, or worse, destroyed homes. I am also concerned that ongoing sectarian divisions could be preventing the government from mustering the political will necessary to deal with the refugee crisis. We should assess whether the government’s Shiite majority has an agenda to keep large numbers of Sunni refugees from returning to Iraq, and we also need to understand what is prompting thousands of Iraqi Christians to flee to Syria.

The exodus of refugees out of Iraq is overwhelming Iraq’s neighbors, which I witnessed firsthand during my trip to Jordan in 2007. Countries like Jordan and Syria cannot handle the constant flow of refugees from Iraq, and some have started to impose legal and visa restrictions on new arrivals. These countries are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and have denied Iraqi refugees within their borders the protections and basic human rights refugees claim in most countries. As Refugees International reported last month, these Iraqis cannot find gainful employment in their host countries, and they are quickly running out of resources to sustain themselves. Unfortunately, the return of refugees to Iraq, however desirable, continues to be problematic, due to a difficult security environment and inadequate living conditions awaiting them at home.

I was pleased to hear that the Obama Administration announced FY2009 contributions of more than \$141 million to help displaced Iraqis. However, the crisis does not appear to be improving. It is my understanding that the Administration is engaged in an ongoing review of

policy towards the refugee challenge. President Obama has announced that, by August 2010, the majority of U.S. troops will be withdrawn from Iraq. While I fully support the President's plan to withdraw our forces from Iraq, I believe we must sustain our commitment to the refugee and IDP situation affecting nearly five million of its citizens, especially when the problem cannot be effectively controlled by the Iraqi government and places undue strain on its neighbors. We cannot ignore the consequences for regional stability and Iraq's internal order if a large population of dispossessed and displaced individuals remains in place. Without any opportunity for reintegration or an escape from poverty and despair, displaced populations may be susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups, threatening the viability of the Iraqi state.

In September 2008, my distinguished colleague, Senator Ben Cardin, and I filed legislation – titled “The Support for Vulnerable and Displaced Iraqis Act of 2008” – to mandate the development of a comprehensive U.S. strategy to address the mass displacement of Iraqis. This bill addressed several issues that are still pertinent today. And as several of my colleagues and I emphasized to then President-elect Obama in a letter we wrote in December 2008, these issues should be a focus of his administration's overall approach to Iraq.

First, a U.S. strategy on Iraqi refugees should address the responsibility of the Iraqi government to help meet the urgent needs of its displaced citizens, including an assessment of how much assistance is needed to help meet these needs. Second, it should assess what conditions are necessary for the voluntary, safe, and sustainable return of displaced Iraqis. Finally, it should outline steps the U.S. government will take to engage the international community to implement the strategy. It is imperative that the United States work in concert with Iraq's neighbors, donor governments, and other international actors to address challenges facing Iraqi refugees and IDPs, such as:

- the lack of legal status for refugees;
- the inability of refugees to work legally;
- limited access to health care and education;
- critical food shortages;
- inadequate shelter, drinking water, sanitation, and protection.

Moreover, in the context of renewing U.S. engagement with Syria, the Administration could find an important avenue for cooperation by working with Damascus on the refugee crisis.

The U.S. government can also bolster its efforts to resettle in the United States those Iraqi refugees who risked their lives to assist the U.S. mission. Resettlement is the right thing to do, and it would also ease the burden on Iraq's neighbors. Only in 2007 did the previous Administration significantly increase the number of Iraq refugees to be settled in the United States. And even though the U.S. exceeded its FY 2008 admissions target of 12,000 Iraqi refugees, the demand for resettlement outpaces the steps the U.S. government is taking. Any comprehensive U.S. strategy on Iraqi refugees should examine our current resettlement plan, and draw on all relevant government agencies to support this process.

We are joined here today by an esteemed panel of experts, who will discuss the myriad challenges involved in the Iraqi refugee crisis. Our first witness is Ellen Laipson, President and CEO of The Henry L. Stimson Center since 2002. Ms. Laipson is one of Washington's preeminent authorities on the Middle East, having written extensively about the challenges the United States faces in Iraq. Prior to joining the Stimson Center, Ms. Laipson served nearly 25 years in the United States government, many of which were devoted to analysis and policymaking on Middle Eastern issues. She was the Vice Chair of the National Intelligence Council from 1997-2002, and held senior posts at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations and in the National Security Council. I look forward to her analysis of the refugee crisis, how it relates to regional stability, and how the United States should approach this problem.

Nancy Aossey is President and CEO of the International Medical Corps. After becoming CEO shortly after IMC's founding in the mid-1980s, Ms. Aossey helped to transform International Medical Corps into one of the world's largest humanitarian organizations, providing more than \$120 million in disaster response and recovery programs annually. Thanks to Ms. Aossey's leadership, International Medical Corps assists the internally displaced throughout Iraq, providing badly needed medical care to those in need. She has also served as Chairman of the Board of InterAction and now serves on its Executive Committee.

Our final witness is Dr. Nabil al Tikriti of the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Dr. al Tikriti has written extensively on the effects of population displacement in Iraq and its neighbors, and its policy implications for the region. In addition to his scholarship, Al-Tikriti volunteered with the Catholic Relief Services humanitarian assistance project in Iraq in 1991-1992, and later served with Doctors without Borders as a relief worker in Somalia, Iran, Albania, Turkey, and Jordan.

Before we turn to our witnesses, I would like to enter into the formal hearing record a statement submitted to the Committee by Mr. Kenneth Bacon, President of Refugees International, and Kristele Younes, Senior Advocate for Refugees International.

I encourage all of our witnesses to keep their remarks brief and succinct so that we can move to questions; accordingly, please limit your oral statement to no more than ten minutes. If that requires you to summarize your statement, the text of your full statement will be included in the hearing record.