



**UNHCR**

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

# **RETURNEE MONITORING**

**GOVERNORATES OF**

**DOHUK**

**ERBIL**

**SULAYMANIYAH**

**(THREE NORTHERN GOVERNORATES)**

**UNHCR, JUNE 2005**

## Returnee Monitoring: Three Northern Governorates

This returnee monitoring report, prepared by International Relief and Development (IRD – Iraq Programme) and UNHCR, and based on information collected by IRD, is not intended to be a comprehensive human rights report, nor is the report an expression of political opinion or a statement of UNHCR policy.

In the future, UNHCR will issue assessment reports on particular governorates or areas to which significant returns are taking place or will take place. This should, *inter alia*, ensure that every person considering return or settlement in a particular place is fully and objectively informed about the security, political, economic and social situation prevailing in that area and can therefore make an informed decision to return.

These reports will be updated on a regular basis.

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## INTRODUCTION

UNHCR is of the opinion that with the widespread insecurity, the open political process and the strained economic situation, a very cautious approach should be adopted in assessing the conditions for return in Iraq. For these reasons, UNHCR is currently not promoting return to Iraq but rather facilitating, in close coordination with the Iraqi authorities and the host countries, those Iraqis who voluntarily express their wish to return to Iraq despite and with full knowledge of the current conditions, including UNHCR's limited protection, assistance and monitoring capacities. While UNHCR does not stand in the way of truly voluntary returns, it is not facilitating returns to areas where returnees may be exposed to a risk to their lives or where the return of large numbers could cause or exacerbate tensions among communities, e.g. due to unresolved property disputes.

At this stage, it is estimated that after the regime change a total number of approximately 250,000 Iraqis returned from abroad, of which the large majority returned to the South and some 7,000 to the three Northern Governorates of Erbil, Sulaymaniyah and Dohuk. While all Iraqis are potential beneficiaries of UNHCR's return and reintegration programme, most have returned spontaneously and only some 21,009 (as of 16 June 2005) have been directly assisted in the process of return (of which 3,809 in the Northern Governorates as of December 2004).

As part of its mandate, UNHCR established through its partners a harmonized mechanism and network to monitor the situation of returnees in their places of return. UNHCR has been monitoring returnees in the three Northern Governorates since August 2004 in order to determine to what degree Iraqi refugees can return in safety and dignity. Returnee monitoring in the three Northern Governorates is being accomplished through field assessments in each of the governorates by UNHCR's implementing partner International Relief and Development (IRD).

Monitoring the consequences of return, the observance of restoration of national protection and the reintegration situation of returnees is not an end in itself. Monitoring serves clearly defined purposes and overall objectives, namely:

- to identify protection and assistance needs and possible gaps;
- to design appropriate protection and assistance responses, including interventions for further reintegration; and
- to collect relevant country of origin information in order to advise potential returnees, host countries and other actors on the conduciveness for return in safety and dignity.

This report covers the situation of returnees who have returned to the three Northern Governorates since the March 2003 conflict, including both spontaneous returns and UNHCR-facilitated returns, the latter since May 2004. Specific field visits were made to Soran district (Governorate of Erbil) and to the two 'returnee camps' established during 2004 at Kawlok in Ruwanduz sub-district of Soran district and at Chwarqurna in Ranya district, in the Governorate of Sulaymaniyah (please see map below<sup>1</sup>).

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<sup>1</sup> Joint Humanitarian Information Center (JHIC) Erbil, with MapInfo additions.



**Table 2: Categories of Returnees and IDPs**

Category	Returned from outside Iraq	Now in place of origin	Intention to settle
I	Yes (returnee)	Yes	
II	Yes (returnee)	No	Yes
III	No (IDP)	No	Yes
IV	No (returned IDP)	Yes	
V	Yes (returnee)	No	No
VI	No (IDP)	No	No

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The three Northern Governorates are made of the Governorates of Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah and are administered by the Kurdistan Regional Government.<sup>2</sup> The total area is about 36,300 km<sup>2</sup> and the population is estimated at 5 million (2002 estimates).<sup>3</sup>

The three Northern Governorates host the largest IDP population in the country.<sup>4</sup> The history of displacement in, and flight from, the three Northern Governorates is a long and complex one. Some of the key events causing displacement are:

- 1975 Collapse of the Kurdish uprising after the Shah of Iran, who had supported the Kurds, signed the Agreement of Algiers with the Iraqi Government;
- 1960s-1990s Iraqi government policy of 'Arabization', including the destruction of villages, the forced relocation of Kurdish, Turkmen and Assyrian families and the formation of collective towns;
- 1980-8 Iraq-Iran War;
- 1987-8 Anti-Kurdish 'Anfal' campaign by the central government;
- 1991 Gulf War after occupation of Kuwait, followed by an uprising and its repression;
- Mid 1990s Fighting between the two main Kurdish political parties, namely the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), as well as fighting between the PKK and the Turkish military.

## MAJOR POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS DURING THE REPORTING PERIOD

The 30 January 2005 National Assembly and Kurdistan National Assembly (parliament of the KRG-administered region) elections are the main events that

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<sup>2</sup> See Art. 53(A) TAL, 'The Kurdistan Regional Government is recognized as the official government of the territories that were administered by the that government on 19 March 2003 in the governorates of Dohuk, Arbil, Sulaimaniya, Kirkuk, Diyala and Neneveh'. For the purpose of this paper, the Governorates of Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymanyiah are referred to as the three Northern Governorates.

<sup>3</sup> Encyclopedia of the Orient, the Iraqi Republic, <http://lexicorient.com/e.o/iraq.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> According to surveys undertaken by UNOPS, there are 90,670 families displaced in collective towns and 6,027 in public buildings. In addition, there are further IDP families living in private accommodation or other types of accommodation (e.g. make-shift accommodation).

influenced the political climate during this period. In the national elections, the Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan, a coalition made up mainly of the KDP and the PUK, was in second place with some 26 percent of the vote, earning 75 seats in the National Assembly. Jalal Talabani, the chairman of the PUK, has been approved by the National Assembly as the first Kurdish President of Iraq on 6 April 2005.

The two major Kurdish parties also ran a joint slate in the Kurdish regional elections. The Kurdistan Alliance received almost 90 percent of the vote and will take up 104 of the 111 seats in the Kurdistan National Assembly. The new members of government were selected and approved in late April and early May 2005. At this stage, the planned unification of the two separate Kurdish administrations of the KDP (Governorates of Erbil and Dohuk) and the PUK (Governorate of Sulaymaniyah) have not been realized. The clashes between KDP and PUK members after the nomination of Jalal Talabani as Iraq's President still show the lack of unity.

## **SECURITY SITUATION IN THE THREE NORTHERN GOVERNORATES**

The situation in the three Northern Governorates administered by the Kurdish Regional Government has not, unlike the rest of the country, changed significantly as a result of the fall of the former regime. Although the overall security conditions appear to be somewhat more stable in comparison with the rest of the country, the situation remains tense and unpredictable. There is a high level of fear that the conflict prevailing in the other parts of the country, in particular in the Governorates of Kirkuk and Mosul, might spill over to the three Northern Governorates. Accordingly, the security measures applied within the three Northern Governorates are very strict (numerous checkpoints within the region, high presence of security forces, limited freedom of movement). On 27 June 2005, Nechirvan Barzani, head of the KRG, said that Kurdish security forces had 'arrested a large number of terrorists', adding that the proximity of Erbil to Kirkuk and Mosul had facilitated their entry to the area.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, security incidents such as assassinations and assassination attempts of high-profile persons, in particular politicians, as well as suicide attacks by extremist groups such as Ansar Al-Sunna, do take place, even if at a lower scale than in other parts of the country. The recent suicide attacks on a KDP office in Erbil killing more than 60 people<sup>6</sup> and on a police recruitment centre in Erbil killing at least 11 people,<sup>7</sup> show the vulnerability of the security situation in the three Northern Governorates.

## **GENERAL OVERVIEW OF RETURN AND REINTEGRATION PROCESS**

Returns to the three Northern Governorates have happened since the establishment of the internationally monitored 'safe heaven' or 'no-fly zone' (covering the region north

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<sup>5</sup> Kurdistan Observer, *Nechirvan Barzani Says Security Forces Arrest Terrorists in Arbil*, 27 June 2005, <http://home.cogeco.ca/~kobserver/27-6-05-nechirvan-says-arrest-terrorists.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Reuters, *Iraq's Ansar al-Sunna claims Arbil bombing*, 4 May 2005, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L04286003.htm>

<sup>7</sup> BBC, *Attack on Erbil police kills many*, 20 June 2005, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4109908.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4109908.stm)

of the 36<sup>th</sup> parallel) by Coalition forces in the aftermath of the first Gulf War (1991), thus enabling the Kurds to establish a *de facto* autonomy from Baghdad. The majority of Iraqi refugees in Iran returned spontaneously to Northern Iraq, yet some returned with the assistance of UNHCR. UNHCR suspended its return programme in 1998 after the Iraqi government demanded that lists of returnees be provided to it and that all repatriates returning to Northern Iraq first pass through government controls before heading to the Kurdish-controlled region. UNHCR started to facilitate returns again in May 2004.

In general, refugees aim at returning to their previous places of origin. However, this process has been impeded by a number of factors, which have resulted in a high number of refugees returning into internal displacement, effectively adding to the already significant caseload of IDPs in the region, with 20,400 IDP families in Dohuk, 33,730 families in Erbil and 42,567 families in Sulaymaniyah (figures as of April 2005).<sup>8</sup>

**Major obstacles impeding return to areas of origin:**

- Heavy presence of mines (many dating back to the Iraq-Iran war), especially in areas bordering Iran but also Turkey;
- Destruction of thousands of villages as part of the 'Devillagisation' and 'Anfal' campaigns;
- Continuing insecurity in some areas, particularly near the Turkish border as a result of the activities of the Kurdish Workers Party (the PKK); and
- Slow pace of reconstruction in rural areas, partly as a result of the factors mentioned above.

Since the 2003 conflict, an additional dynamic to the return process has been the movement of people from above the former 'green line' to areas south of it, particularly Kurdish returns into the Governorates of Kirkuk and Northern Ninewa (Mosul).

For the reasons mentioned above, many refugees were either unable to return to their place of origin or felt more attracted to settle in urban areas due to the relatively better infrastructure and prospects of living.

***Spontaneous Returns During the First Quarter of 2005***

Despite the suspension of UNHCR's facilitated return programme during the winter season, Iraqi refugees in Iran continued to return spontaneously to the three Northern Governorates of Iraq.

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<sup>8</sup> Figures provided by UNOPS, UNHCR's IDP monitoring partner.

**Table 3: Spontaneous Returns to the Three Northern Governorates (January - March 2005)<sup>9</sup>**

Area of return	No. of families	No. of persons
Erbil and Dohuk	74	248
Sulaymaniyah	99	495
<b>Total</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>774</b>

These numbers show a significant decrease compared with the numbers of October-December 2004, when, *inter alia*, 257 families (904 persons) returned to the Governorate of Erbil alone. This decrease can be explained by a combination of factors, including seasonal considerations, a reduced number of those wishing to return as well as the experience of others that assistance provided to returnees is limited.

## MONITORING RESULTS

### *Soran District (Governorate of Erbil)*

Soran district, and particularly the Dyana sub-district, has the highest number of returnees in the Governorate of Erbil. Therefore, this area was selected for monitoring following the resumption of monitoring activities in 2005. The main finding was that only about 20 percent of the families surveyed had actually returned to their place of origin. All other refugees, almost 80 percent, returned into internal displacement, either because their villages in the same or neighbouring districts (such as Choman) are still destroyed (majority of the surveyed population) or because they have become used to live in an urban environment and are therefore unwilling to return to rural locations due to the lack of services available there.

The table below is an estimate of the total number of returnee households in Dyana district center, broken down by category (group of concern), gender and age profile.

**Table 4: Returnee Households in Dyana District (Estimate)**

Group	HHs	Gender		Age				
		M	F	<1	1 - 4	5 - 17	18 - 59	> 60
I	15	35	45	4	7	30	35	4
II	60	225	275	15	20	90	165	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>260</b>	<b>320</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>14</b>

Some of the main findings for these groups are:

- **Shelter**

72 percent of households interviewed reported that they had owned their own homes prior to their departure to Iran, whereas now only 11 percent are living in houses they own. In almost all cases, they would be able to recover their land, however, their houses are still destroyed. 50 percent are now renting houses and a further 14 percent

<sup>9</sup> Information was provided by the Refugee Registration Committee for the Governorates of Erbil and Dohuk and the Ministry of Human Rights, IDPs and 'Anfal' (MOHR) in the Governorate of Sulaymaniyah.

are living with relatives in the area. The main reasons for not returning to rebuild their houses in their places of origin are lack of financial resources and the lack of basic services in these areas. While the quality of their current housing is adequate, with block built walls and concrete roofs, many of the dwellings are overcrowded. In terms of their future needs, 89 percent of the households ranked housing construction as their first priority.

- ***Access to Basic Services***

In general, returnee families reported to have the same access to basic services (e.g. water, sanitation, health care and education) as the local population. All returnees were able to register with a food distribution agent and thus obtained food through the Public Distribution System (PDS) without difficulty. Like most families, they tend to sell some part of the monthly ration and use this and other income and savings to supplement these rations by buying fresh food such as fruits, vegetables and meat to diversify their nourishment.<sup>10</sup>

Of particular concern is that 28 percent of the households have inadequate access to safe water and in 6 percent of the households girls lack access to education.

- ***Employment***

Only a small number of the returnees have regular employment. 28 percent of the households listed casual employment as their most important source of income (often manual labour, e.g. garbage collection through the municipality); 22 percent are relying on their savings as their main source of income, with only 23 percent having a regular employment (again usually government jobs) or being self-employed. Almost no household ranked agriculture as main source of income and 67 percent of the households ranked employment opportunities as their second most important need after shelter.

- ***Other Protection Concerns***

Given the fact that all returnees surveyed have the same political, ethnic and religious background as the host population, no discrimination against returnees or tensions between return and host communities for political, ethnic or religious reasons were reported.

### ***Kawlok Hamiya Camp (Governorate of Erbil)***

This camp site was first established in 1998 as a temporary transit facility for returnees from Iran before its closure in 2000, when its residents were resettled under a United Nations Oil-for-Food project. Nevertheless, the site, which includes 36 hard shelter units made of cement blocks, has been occupied continuously by various returnees and IDPs. In 2004, the local authorities decided to reactivate the camp for newly arriving returnees who are unable to return to their original homes. Although the facility was foreseen as a temporary solution, no longer-term solution has been outlined by the local authorities. The 2004 arrivals who returned with UNHCR assistance are currently living in tents set up on cement bases with low block-built

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<sup>10</sup> Under the PDS, every Iraqi receives a monthly ration including rice, salt, sugar, beans, tea, vegetable oil cereal and infant formula. At times, there are significant country-wide shortfalls in certain commodities or delays in distribution due to insecurity.

sheltering walls as a form of winterization. The camp is under the management of the local authorities.

The table below is an estimate of the total number of returnee households in the camp, broken down by category (group of concern), gender and age profile.

**Table 5: Returnee Households in Kawlok Hamiya Camp (Estimate)**

Group	HHs	Gender		Age				
		M	F	<1	1 – 4	5 – 17	18 – 59	>60
II	40	55	70	5	11	45	65	4
V	26	25	35	2	5	20	30	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>7</b>

The basic findings for these groups are:

- ***Shelter***

Currently, 66 families (approximately 200 persons) are living in tents in this camp. Many of them have been unable to return to their original villages in the nearby districts of Soran, Choman and Mergasur as the villages were destroyed by the former regime as part of the ‘Devillagisation’ process and later the ‘Anfal’ campaign and have so far not been rehabilitated. 12 families originate from Kirkuk.

- ***Access to Basic Services***

Water is being tankered to the site by an international NGO. All families have been registered with a food distribution agent and receive regular food rations through the PDS, which they supplement by buying additional food. Another international NGO is providing health services through a mobile health team which serves the camp on a weekly basis. A generator for electricity has been provided by the local authorities. The returnee children are able to access the Kawlokan village primary school (about 2 km away) and secondary schooling at Soran (approx. 6 km away). The families have been assisted to obtain their necessary legal documents by the Legal Aid Center which is run by the local authorities with support from *IRD* in nearby Dyana.

- ***Employment***

Only a small number of the returnees has regular employment, most of which is temporary employment provided by the local municipality (e.g. garbage collection and jobs as local guards).

- ***Other Protection Concerns***

Given the fact that all returnees surveyed have the same political, ethnic and religious background as the host population, no discrimination against returnees or tensions between return and host communities for political, ethnic or religious reasons was reported.

- ***Assistance Received Since Returning***

Various actors have been providing immediate material and financial assistance. For example, the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Refugee Registration Committee (RRC) are providing a monthly cash grant of US\$ 20. The Governor of Erbil made a one off grant of US\$ 100 to each returnee family. In addition, the

families received donations of food and clothing from the *Iraqi Red Crescent* and the U.S. military. However, here is no information to suggest that the local authorities in Erbil plan to offer a similar package of shelter and reintegration assistance (land and cash grants) that is currently being provided in the Governorate of Sulaymaniyah (please see below for further details).

The presence of the camp at Kawlok is a symptom of the difficulties of reintegration for families returning to Iraq. Families either cannot return to their places of origin because their villages were destroyed by the former regime or they no longer wish to return to rural areas due to better prospects of employment and access to public services in urban areas to which many refugees have been accustomed during their refuge abroad. Those interviewed indicated that they would only be willing to return to rural areas if substantial assistance was provided, both at the household level (in particular shelter) and the community level (basic services including water, electricity, schools and health facilities).

The 12 families originating from Kirkuk do not own property there and have no place to go given the strained housing situation in Kirkuk with its more than 21,852 IDP families, of which a quarter is reported to be living in tented camps, a quarter in public buildings, a quarter in collective settlements and, the remaining quarter mixed with the host communities.<sup>11</sup> The families in Kawlok used to rent before their flight from Kirkuk and are now waiting at the camp with the expectation that the KRG will grant them land and financial assistance to resettle there. To date, there is no formal policy to assist such resettlement from this area, although there are reports that the KRG authorities liaise with the Governorate of Kirkuk in order to seek assistance for families who want to return to this area.

### ***Chwarqurna Camp (Governorate of Sulaymaniyah)***

The tented camp at Chwarqurna in Ranya district was established by refugee families who returned under the UNHCR facilitated returns programme during 2004. There are no spontaneous returnees present at this site. The camp is under the administration of the Mayor's office of Ranya and the Directorate of the Ministry of Human Rights' representative in the area. The total number of families that have passed through the camp at some point since it was established is estimated to be 80. Currently, there are 36 families (some 180 persons) residing in the camp. No new families have arrived at the site during 2005.

The table below is an estimate of the total number of returnee households in the camp, broken down by category (group of concern), gender and age profile:

**Table 6: Returnee Households in Chwarqurna Camp (Estimate)**

Group	HHs	Gender		Age				
		M	F	<1	1 – 4	5 – 17	18 – 59	>60
II	36	50	60	4	12	40	50	4

<sup>11</sup> IOM IDP Monitoring, April 2005.

The basic findings for this group are:

- ***Shelter***

The 36 returnee families are housed in tents, many of them distributed by UNHCR in the early phase of the facilitated return programme. About one third of the families are originally from the Choman district in the Governorate of Erbil. They have chosen not to return to their places of origin for the following reasons: their villages have been destroyed and have so far not been rehabilitated; they have political affiliations to the PUK (which controls Sulaymaniyah) and therefore expect more support by the PUK authorities than from the KDP authorities in Erbil. Many of the other families are from the districts of Ranya and Qaladiza of the Sulaymaniyah Governorate. They were unable to return because they originate from villages which were destroyed during the 1980s and which have so far not been reconstructed. It is important to note that most of the returnees do not wish to return or relocate somewhere else, but rather hope to be granted land and assistance in and around the Chwarqurna and Ranya areas.

The basic situation of the camp is poor, with every six families sharing a single poorly constructed latrine, no underground sewage, lack of bathrooms and poor water storage facilities.

- ***Access to Basic Services***

The local administration is providing the families with tankered water. All families have access to the PDS and receive regular food rations. Other food items are being purchased, provided they are able to earn some money. Children are able to access the primary and secondary schools at Chwarqurna and all the families have the same access to health services as the local population of the area. There have been no problems reported in returnees getting access to essential documentation.

- ***Employment***

There are relatively few employment opportunities in the area. Apart from employment as local guards and in municipal garbage collection projects, some men found irregular work as daily laborers.

- ***Other Protection Concerns***

Some of the returnees reported that they are not welcomed in the area (particularly those originating from the districts of Choman and Soran in the Governorate of Erbil), but they did not report any specific incidents of hostility or discrimination.

- ***Assistance Received Since Returning***

Returnees living in the camp have received some limited assistance from the local authorities since their arrival. Former 'Peshmergas' (Kurdish party militias) over 60 years of age receive a monthly cash payment of approximately US\$ 20. Other families have found temporary employment within the local municipality.

To assist those who want to settle in the Governorate of Sulaymaniyah, the local authorities allocate a piece of land (approx. 200m<sup>2</sup>), provide a reconstruction grant of US\$ 1,000 and assist at least one family member to find employment. In March 2005, some 15 families that were at the camp before benefited from this programme. However, it appears that few, if any, have been able to commence construction given

the current high prices for construction materials. The average cost of constructing a two room house, with bathroom and latrine, in the area is currently estimated to be between US\$ 10,000 to 15,000.

It is reported that a further 21 families will be benefiting from this programme. The grants are limited to families that originate from Sulaymaniyah or have strong political links to the local authorities. The average time from application to the granting of land ranges from two to four months. The cash grant is paid by the Ministry of Finance once a family applied for it through the municipality and after the Ministry of Human Rights' endorsement. In order to qualify for the provision of cash and land grants, the applicant is required: a) to have registered with the PUK Foreign Relations Offices in Tehran or Kermanshar before leaving Iran; or b) to have returned under the UNHCR-facilitated returns programme. Those that can show other documentation to prove that they have returned from Iran may receive the land allocation, but not the cash grant.

This camp, like Kawlok, is a symptom of the larger problems of reintegration faced by both refugee and IDP returnees in Northern Iraq. Although most families would place shelter at or near the top of their priority needs, in reality there are the equally important issues of access to services and employment or the need for income-generation projects to sustain their livelihoods.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The monitoring results show that a considerable number of returnees encounter difficulties to fully reintegrate into their communities. Following their return, returnees compete with local communities in accessing public services and benefiting from already scarce and inadequate local resources. The high number of returnees, both refugees from abroad as well as returning IDPs, puts an enormous pressure on the already strained infrastructure such as housing, water, schools, medical services and employment. In the three Northern Governorates particularly, the chronic housing shortage may lead to a longer-term displacement of returnees.

The approach taken by the local authorities in Sulaymaniyah is a commendable one, provided non-contested land is allocated to those who want to settle in this Governorate. It appears that the current assistance provided by the authorities would need to be complemented by other assistance such as the provision of construction materials, income-generating projects and rehabilitation of basic services in order to provide a basis for sustainable return and reintegration.