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USCR Welcomes Start of Iraqi Refugee Repatriation; Urges International Community to Facilitate Return of Other Iraqis Wishing to Return Home

Washington, D.C., August 13, 2003 The U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR) welcomes the recent start of what it hopes will soon become a sustained process of assisted repatriation for Iraqi refugees. In late July, an initial group of some 240 Iraqi refugees returned to Iraq after languishing for 12 years in the Rafha refugee camp in the desert of northern Saudi Arabia. Other groups are scheduled to return August 16 and August 20. The refugees return to their native homeland in convoys of buses and trucks organized by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in concert with Saudi authorities and the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq. UNHCR expects more than 3,600 of the remaining 5,200 refugees in Rafha to be repatriated by year's end.

According to USCR Executive Director Lavinia Limón, who recently conducted a site visit to Iraq and assessed the potential for repatriation, "The US-led Coalition Authorities in Iraq are to be commended for facilitating this first assisted return of Iraqi refugees. There should now be a sustained, U.S.-led effort-in close collaboration with UNHCR and local Iraqi authorities-to facilitate the repatriation of other Iraqi refugees in the region who wish to return home."

USCR has reported on the plight of the refugees in Rafha camp since the camp was built in 1991 to shelter as many as 33,000 refugees. The refugees fled southern Iraq after Saddam Hussein's army brutally suppressed a Shiite Muslim uprising following the 1991 Gulf war. They had followed the call of President George H.W. Bush to rise up against the Baathist regime after the liberation of Kuwait in 1991. During the early and mid-1990s, the United States and other countries offered resettlement to more than 25,000 of the refugees, but some 6,000 remained behind, suffering extreme isolation for years.

Several hundred thousand other Iraqi refugees remain in other countries in the region. More than 200,000 Iraqi Shiite refugees are living in Iran. Some 300,000 Iraqis who fled the Hussein regime are in Jordan and more than 70,000 are in Syria, most without documentation. There are also a large number of Iraqi refugees and asylum-seekers in Europe. Many of them, however, may be reluctant to repatriate at this time due to continuing insecurity in Iraq.

"Last month's tentative launch of refugee repatriation to Iraq from Rafha will hopefully signal the commencement of international collaboration to address the urgent needs of all uprooted Iraqis in the region," said Limón.

The U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR) is a public information and advocacy program of Immigration and Refugee Services of America (IRSA), a nongovernmental, non-profit organization. Since 1958, USCR has defended the rights of refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons worldwide.

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