

**Press release on forced returns to Iraq**

24 February 2004

**UN REFUGEE AGENCY SAYS FORCED RETURNS TO IRAQ ARE PREMATURE**

Following the announcement that the British Government intends to start the forcible removal of failed asylum seekers to Iraq, the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR reiterated its concern in relation to returns to Iraq in general, including in the North. UNHCR believes that such action is premature in the light of the continuing uncertain security situation and the poor infrastructure in the country. UNHCR also believe that conditions do not warrant the promotion of voluntary return to Iraq at this time.

Tensions in Iraq, including northern Iraq, are mounting in the lead-up to transfer of sovereignty scheduled for 1 July and debate about the future structure of the State, including the issue of autonomy for the North. A number of violent attacks have occurred in the North in the recent past, for instance in Erbil.

The Iraqi Minister of Displacement and Migration, Mohammed J. Khodair, has specifically requested UNHCR to pass on his plea to Governments not to rush returns to Iraq until such time when conditions for their organised and smooth return are more convenient and do not constitute an additional burden on Iraq at this time.

The current situation in Iraq remains volatile. It continues to be characterised by frequent security incidents, including attacks on Iraqi nationals, and an absence of law and order in many parts of the country. In addition, Iraq continues to be fraught with the irregular provision of basic services, a high rate of unemployment and a severe housing shortage.

The evacuation of nearly all international UN staff from Iraq following the bomb attack on the UN's Headquarters in Baghdad on 19<sup>th</sup> August has significantly curtailed the ability of UNHCR and its partners to engage in protection and returnee monitoring in Iraq. UNHCR will keep the situation and its advice under review.

ENDS.

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