

**Brice Hortefeux Minister of Immigration, Integration,
National Identity and Co-Development
EU Presidency**

Brussels, 28 July 2008

Dear Minister,

Subject: Urgent need for resettlement of stranded Palestinian refugees from Iraq

We have read with interest the conclusions on the situation of Iraqi refugees in the Member States of the EU adopted by the Justice and Home Affairs Council on 24-25 July 2008. As the conclusions state, it is still necessary to look at the needs of these refugees and realize the international community has a responsibility in this matter. We consider resettlement as one of the tools necessary to respond to this humanitarian crisis. We would like to draw your attention to the emergency situation of a group of Palestinian refugees stranded in extremely difficult and dangerous conditions in camps on the borders of Syria and Iraq. Denmark, The Netherlands and Sweden have already taken some action to relieve the situation of these Palestinian refugees. We would like to encourage all EU Member States to follow their example and help resolve this situation by resettling this group. If each Member State were to share the responsibility equally this would amount to resettling a mere 10 families each. This modest act would provide a durable solution for the Palestinians in the Al Hol, Al Tanf and Al Waleed camps.

When the Iraq War began in 2003, there were an estimated 34,000 Palestinian refugees living in that country. They had enjoyed a relatively high level of protection under the previous government. After the fall of Saddam Hussein, however, this group came under severe threat. They have been especially targeted by a wide variety of armed groups who have threatened, abducted, detained, maimed, killed, and tortured many of them. Thousands of Palestinians fled Iraq as a result. Currently, more than 3,000 Palestinians from Iraq are living in three makeshift camps: Al Hol camp in Syria, Al Waleed camp just inside Iraq, near the border in Syria, and Al Tanf Camp, in the no-man's land at the border between Iraq and Syria. There are 837 families, with around 1,347 children under 18 years of age.

The conditions in these camps are horrific. Temperatures soar to 50 degrees Celsius in summer and plunge to below freezing in winter. Canvas tents are the only protection from heat, cold and blinding sandstorms. The land is infested with scorpions and snakes. Danger is everywhere, especially for the children. In Al Tanf camp, the school tents are unprotected from the busy highway, which has already claimed the life of a boy knocked down by a truck. In April 2007, a fire engulfed much of Al Tanf camp, the second to hit the camp. More recently, in March and May 2008, there were fires in the Al Waleed camp. Furthermore, the health situation has become increasingly dire. Proper medical care is not available to respond to the needs of people with medical conditions ranging from diabetes, birth defects to kidney problems, cancer and serious trauma. According to UNHCR, in the past 14 months alone, 12 refugees have died, highlighting the urgent need for a more effective response.

UNHCR has actively sought the resettlement of these refugees to other countries, but with limited success. To date, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Iceland and Sweden have resettled or are in the process of resettling groups of refugees from this particularly vulnerable cohort. In addition, smaller numbers of refugees, mainly persons with urgent medical needs, have been resettled to Denmark, the Netherlands and Norway. Efforts by UNHCR to improve the situation in the camps continue, but are restricted in their impact by difficult access and the entirely unsuitable location of the camps.

We appeal to you to act urgently on our recommendations as a very important and positive first step to implementing the conclusions on Iraqi refugees adopted by the JHA Council on 24-25 July 2008. As NGOs we would be willing to support EU Member States in undertaking such a response. In developing their contribution to the global system of refugee resettlement we also urge Member States not to forget UNHCR's projections of 155,000 refugees in need of resettlement around the world in 2008.

Yours sincerely,



Amnesty International EU office



Caritas International



Danish Refugee Council



European Council on Refugees and Exiles



International Catholic Migration Commission



International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims



International Rescue Committee – Belgium and the United Kingdom



Médecins du Monde – France



Médecins du Monde – Greece



Mercy Corps



NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq



Norwegian Refugee Council



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