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**Iraqi refugees need a lifeline**

By Sylvia Chi - 01/14/11 02:22 PM ET

It has been a brutal and violent few weeks for Iraqis.

At the end of October, over 50 Christian Iraqis were massacred at a church in Baghdad. Since then, organized attacks on Christian Iraqis have escalated throughout the country. This is not the beginning of such persecution: of the estimated 1.2 million Christians in Iraq in 2003, only approximately 600,000 remain today. But with this latest wave of violence, numerous Christian leaders have called for stepped up efforts to address the resulting refugee crisis.

To add to that, news reports at the end of December showed that the U.S. troop drawdown has left Iraqis who assisted the U.S. stranded and in danger. Other reports confirm that young Iraqi women are increasingly at risk of sexual trafficking. In addition, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees released a survey indicating that the majority of Iraqi refugees who returned to Iraq wish they had never come back.

Already, violence in Iraq has displaced an estimated 2 million Iraqis inside the country, and caused another 2 million to leave altogether. But it appears this Iraqi refugee crisis is going to worsen before it improves. The U.S. must respond to this humanitarian tragedy by allowing for the emergency evacuation of Iraqi minority groups at imminent risk of death or torture.

So far, the international community has fallen short of effectively assisting the most vulnerable Iraqis. This was dramatically illustrated when a flimsy, 30 foot wooden boat wrecked on Australia's Christmas Island in December. The boat had set sail from Indonesia, carrying as many as 70 asylum seekers believed to hail from Iraq and Iran. While dozens were rescued from the water, at least 27 others perished in the waves. At its heart, this tragedy began with the desperate decision of each refugee that crossing the Indian Ocean in a shoebox was safer than rolling the dice on the refugee resettlement system.

We must ask ourselves: What kind of desperation caused these people to take such a perilous journey across the Indian Ocean, so far from their homes in the Middle East? Why was this the only option left to them?

As the recent violence against Christians has demonstrated, more than seven years after the U.S. invasion, Iraq remains a volatile battleground. Members of minority groups daily face threats and bloodshed, and persecution is only worsening. Iraq's government and leaders have proven

ineffective at protecting the country's vulnerable populations. It comes as no surprise that Iraqi refugees regret returning home, and many more continue to seek safety in foreign countries.

In fact, every day, thousands of Iraqis embark on harrowing journeys to escape targeted bombings and assassinations. Yet, the complicated machinery of the U.S. refugee system continues at a snail's pace. Instead of providing an expedited route to safety, the system demands Iraqis navigate a system of redundant and onerous documentation requirements. As they try to escape imminent danger, Iraqis and their families are routinely forced to wait in suspended anxiety for months or years while their applications are processed; the New York Times recently reported on the Gorgiz family, described as "living in a state of virtual siege."

At the Iraqi Refugee Assistance Project, a network of hundreds of volunteer lawyers and law students providing legal representation to Iraqis seeking resettlement, we are currently counseling a client who leads an Iraqi women's Christian human rights group and has found herself confined, unable to go to the market or send her two young children to school for fear they will be targeted. From her place of hiding, she reports how Christian neighborhoods are being bombed all around her as she attempts to gather the paperwork necessary to apply for refugee status, taking time out only to bury her priest.

Clearly, there is a pressing need for reform in the refugee system. The United States has a moral responsibility to help Iraqis trying to escape brutal persecution, particularly as our combat troops leave the country and violence escalates. Through our over 200 Iraqi refugee resettlement cases, IRAP has seen that the U.S. refugee system needs to provide emergency evacuation opportunities for the most vulnerable Iraqis and we have called for expediting refugee applicants in imminent danger.

The U.S. already has the tools available to do just that: its priority processing system can designate vulnerable groups of Iraqis to allow for their accelerated processing. Along with Christians, young women and LGBT Iraqis have suffered increased persecution while the government and security forces remain unable or unwilling to keep them safe. However, the U.S. currently only extends expedited processing to Iraqi refugees who assisted the U.S. mission. This leaves behind thousands at imminent risk of rape, kidnapping or "honor killing," who were simply not lucky enough to learn English and get a job with an international organization. They are left to choose between persecution in Iraq or an illegal and dangerous flight to an unknown country.

Surely they deserve a third option. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton already has the authority to create new priority processing categories under the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act, and should immediately look into the process of creating such categories for religious minorities, victims of trafficking and LGBT Iraqi refugees.

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