

Plight of Iraqi refugees shapes nuns' visit to Middle East

WASHINGTON - A family of six Iraqis lives in a unheated, single room in Beirut, Lebanon - the adults unable to work legally, the teenager with diabetes unable to get medical care or attend school.

The family - an engineer, his wife and three children, and the wife's brother - fled violence in their homeland two years after they received threats and their home was fired upon. Once out of the country, they quickly burned through their savings.

For Mercy Sister Anne Curtis, the refugee family helped define what she described as abhorrent conditions for the millions of Iraqis who have fled their homeland, most taking up residence in Lebanon or Syria.

She was one of a group of eight U.S. women religious from different communities who spent more than a week with Catholic Relief Services in mid-January looking into the problems and aid opportunities for Iraqi refugees in Syria and Lebanon. CRS is the U.S. bishops' overseas relief and development agency.

"I'm still sorting out my impressions," Sister Curtis told Catholic News Service in a phone interview a few days after the delegation returned to the U.S. Jan. 20.

During her first few days in the Middle East - her first trip to the region - she said she felt "an overwhelming sense of sorrow and shame about a U.S. war and the consequences; such massive human suffering."

In a teleconference sponsored by Catholic and evangelical organizations Jan. 24, Sister Curtis decried the lack of attention to the plight of Iraqis who have fled their homes.

"The nation needs to understand the reality of the millions of Iraqi refugees," she said. "The situation facing Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons is one of the most pressing humanitarian crises in the world."

She explained that the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that the current global population of Iraqi refugees exceeds 4 million, including 1.9 million still inside Iraq, and more than 2 million in neighboring Middle Eastern countries.

The refugees they saw with CRS were mostly living in urban settings, in apartment buildings. For example, the engineer's family was in one room of a building that had water flowing on the floor of the dark entryway. The apartments had no electricity, heat or furniture, and only a few mattresses on the floor, she said.

The delegation also spent some time visiting a detention center for detained refugees in Lebanon, she said.

"That was like looking at people inside a cage," she said. "It was pretty horrifying."

The bottom line for all the situations in which they saw refugees, said Sister Curtis, is that "basic human needs are not being met."

The group from the U.S. also met with church leaders, representatives of the United Nations and nongovernmental organizations that provide aid, and sisters of various religious orders who live and work with the refugee population.

"They were astounding," she said, describing the nuns' deep commitment to helping people in a complex, frustrating situation.

"This has not been put in front of people," she said. She came away with a strong sense that the American public needs a better understanding of the human consequences of the ongoing war, particularly the need for millions of people to find a permanent place to resettle, said Sister Curtis.

In the teleconference timed to coincide with the return of Congress to work and shortly before the State of the Union address, she summed up the philosophy of the Sisters of Mercy leadership team, of which she is a member.

"The Sisters of Mercy have a commitment to promote peacemaking at all levels and we recognize an urgent duty and challenge to stand in solidarity with immigrants," she said.

“Therefore, we believe that President (George W.) Bush has a responsibility – a moral obligation to end the war in Iraq and aid the refugees by expediting the processing of refugee applicants and to provide the necessary funding for humanitarian assistance,” she said.

In his State of the Union address Jan. 28, Bush made no mention of when the war is likely to end, saying the U.S. objective “is to sustain and build on the gains we made in 2007,” and that U.S. forces will transition from leading operations to “partnering with Iraqi forces.”

He did note that more than 20,000 U.S. troops will be coming home but said any further drawdown of troops would be based on conditions in Iraq and recommendations of commanders there. He warned that “too fast a drawdown” would result in chaos and wipe out the progress he said has been made in the country.