
'OUR LIFE IS HELL': IRAQ'S IDPS SUFFER INTERMINABLE WAIT FOR HOME

- 29.07.2018

Aljazeera (28 July 2018)

For Hend Ali, there was no other option but to stay put.

The 36-year-old mother of six has been living for three years now at al-Khadra, a camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) tucked behind blocks of dilapidated apartment buildings in Iraq's capital, Baghdad.

Like many others across the country, Hend was forced to flee her home in 2015 as military operations and ISIL attacks escalated after the armed group's fighters swept through Iraq, occupying one-third of its territory.

Following Baghdad's victory over ISIL last year, the families in the camp, which numbered in the hundreds in 2016, were expected to return to their homes.

But dozens of them, including Ali's, had nothing to go back to.

"I visited my home three months ago, but everything was destroyed," says Hend, recalling her trip to al-Qa'im town in Anbar province. "The walls and windows are gone. The foundations [of the house] are gone. It's just part of the roof that remains."

The devastation, poverty and a lack of services in the recaptured areas forced Hend, like many other displaced Iraqis, to choose the lesser of two evils and stay in the camp.

"I came back to the camp because there was nothing [in Anbar]," she says. "[There's] no water, no electricity, and no work."

Over two million Iraqis remain displaced

The about 100 residents of al-Khadra camp are among the 2.14 million Iraqis who have been displaced since January 2014, according to the UN's refugee agency, the UNHCR.

Inside the camp, which offers residents little more than shelter from the scorching summer heat, children run up and down its arid walkways and play in the sand between rows of neatly set tents.

As women hang their children's washed clothes to dry in the sun, while others cook meals on bunsen burners inside the tents that have housed them for years, there is no sign of this camp closing down any time soon.

Hend says that if the government provided the IDPs with the most basic needs in Anbar, which lies 400km northwest of the capital Baghdad, she would go back immediately.

"If there were basic services, we'd return [home] from tomorrow, even if it means that we sustain ourselves by eating grass."

For Dalya Ali, just like Like Hend, heading home to Fallujah, another city in Anbar province, is not a viable option.

"I went back to Fallujah a few months ago. I was forced to live in a tent for three months because everything is gone," says Dalya, a 31-year-old mother of five.

"It was too much to bear with no water and no place to live, so I came back."

Dalya Ali is one of more than two million IDPs spread throughout Iraq [Arwa Ibrahim/Al Jazeera]

Families who live at al-Khadra are given a tent and a monthly salary of 20,000 Iraqi dinars (\$18) per individual to cover the cost of food and other basic items.

Life, however, is still difficult.

With electricity shortages across the country, people have to buy fuel or pay privately owned generators to get by. For the camp's residents, this is not an option.

According to Dahaa al-Rawi, the camp founder and manager who is also a member of the Baghdad local government, donations by local charities and funds from international organisations, including the World Food Programme, are becoming depleted.

"We don't have enough money to pay for the electricity," says al-Rawi. "They (residents) have to pay for that themselves."

Dalya, who says her life was simple but settled back home, wonders how long she will have to remain at the camp.

"We can barely get by but we have nowhere else to go. Until when our situation will remain like this? Life has become too hard."

'Our life is hell'

For the Iraqi government, the challenging situation for IDPs will not be resolved until the recaptured areas are rebuilt. Yet, this is a mammoth task, one that is tied to Baghdad receiving more support from the international community.

What's fuelling the latest unrest in Iraq?

Sattar Nawroz, a spokesperson for the migration and displacement ministry, says authorities are hoping to achieve this goal. He admits, however, that this is becoming increasingly difficult.

"The ideal situation is for displaced families is that they return voluntarily to their homes but this requires for these areas to be become ready to receive them," says Nawroz.

"This requires for us to rebuild the infrastructure and provide basic services including water,

electricity and education.

"With so many crises in the region, funds from regional and international donors have shrunk," he adds, explaining that delays in government formation are further delaying this process.

With the final results of the May 12 elections yet to be approved by a federal court, and despite the last parliament's term ending on June 31, a new government has yet to be formed.

But, for Hend, waiting any longer is becoming too much.

"Our life is hell no matter what," she says.

"We came here [to the camp] and it's hell. And if we were to go home it would still be hell.

"I wish I never had to go through all this."

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