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Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
House of Representatives

Hearing on:
Humanitarian and Human Rights Concerns of the Current Crisis in Iraq

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I would like to thank the co-chairs, Congressman Jim McGovern and Congressman Frank Wolf for holding this important and timely hearing.

Mercy Corps has been in Iraq since 2003 working all over the country, with programs that have focused on supporting the growth of a healthier Iraqi civil society. Our current emergency response efforts addressing Iraq's humanitarian crisis are leveraging these investments to meet the needs of all conflict affected populations -- refugees from Syria, internally displaced Iraqis, as well as host communities.

Overview of Humanitarian needs

I have just returned from a one week trip to Iraq where I saw firsthand just how desperate the humanitarian situation is for hundreds of thousands of people. Among them are Christians like the Nasr family -- a family of eight who fled their home in Karakosh near Mosul about two months ago when the Islamic State arrived. They now live in the partially built Ankawa Shopping mall in Erbil in Iraq's Kurdish Region. This facility is being managed by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and yet there is no heat, no regular sources of food or water and an irregular supply of electricity. Imagine what that means for the family's newest addition -- an 18-day old baby? Or for the oldest member -- 74-year old Sabihah Abdullah Ibrahim who is blind in one eye and a diabetic with no money for medicine? The other night Mrs. Ibrahim told me she tripped while she was walking to the bathroom in the dark and injured her foot, which is already swollen and inflamed from her untreated diabetes.

Cascading waves of violence since January 2014 have displaced over two million Iraqis like Mrs. Ibrahim and her family (with 1.4 million since June) as well as 230,000 refugees from Syria. With the arrival of heavy winter rains and sub-zero temperatures, shelter and winterization supplies are a paramount concern for approximately 800,000 internally displaced Iraqis, while at least 940,000 lack essential household items like blankets, mattresses, food and basic hygiene supplies like soap.

Displacement camps run by the United Nations have reached capacity, while others remain ill-equipped or under construction. As a result, tens of thousands of families are seeking shelter wherever they can find it: in schools, mosques, churches, tents and abandoned or partially constructed buildings like the one shown in this slide on the outskirts of Sulaymaniyah. Here about 100 Yezidis from the Sinjar region -- the old, sick and the very young -- are camping out in what looks like an open grain silo where chickens used to live.

The population influx has increasingly strained public services as host communities struggle to accommodate greater numbers of people. Workable solutions are urgently needed. Indicative of the strain -- the school year has already been postponed several months because so many schools are being used as informal shelters.

And countless internally displaced Iraqis are on the move, with many families displaced multiple times over the past year as they search for work or greater security and assistance. Since the population is so mobile, and needs are in a state of constant flux depending on their location, Mercy Corps believes that cash assistance -- which we plan to synchronize with an emerging governmental social service support system -- has proven to be the most efficient, nimble and effective means to meet evolving needs.

To date, while US and international assistance has focused predominantly on the Kurdish Region of Iraq which is hosting 47% of the total displaced population, it is important to note that all 18 governorates are hosting displaced families. As a result, a single nationwide response framework is of paramount importance to ensure that future planning is inclusive, coordinated and that humanitarian aid is commensurate to levels of need.

Breaking the Cycle of Violence

The current humanitarian emergency in Iraq represents the tyranny of the immediate.

And yet, it was apparent during my meetings with senior Iraqi and Kurdish government officials, as well as with a wide range of Kurdish and Iraqi civil society and displaced Iraqis and Syrian refugees, that the US and other donor governments must move beyond what is effectively a short-term, internationally led approach to delivering aid in Iraq. Not only is this approach much more expensive and less efficient, but it is also adding unnecessary bureaucracy, and as a result, slowing down the response. In addition, it is not strategically leveraging prior US government investments in Iraq's civil society in order to proactively defuse tensions among displaced Iraqis, Syrians and their Iraqi hosts.

Remember, this latest crisis began in Anbar province in January 2014 with peaceful demonstrations against the central government by Iraqi citizens frustrated over the lack

of basic public services. The government repeatedly ignored the protests and eventually the Islamic State seized upon growing anger in Anbar to recruit for their reign of terror.

If poor governance and political and economic grievances continue to go unaddressed, sectarian violence and extremism in Iraq will surely escalate.

Another wild card -- the arrival of tens of thousands of displaced Iraqis in towns and cities across the country -- potentially upsetting the fragile equilibrium of these communities. The time to begin enhancing social cohesion and defusing tensions between the displaced and their hosts is now. And one of the best ways to do this is by mobilizing local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and members of an emerging Iraqi and Kurdish civil society to take the lead.

Thanks to the support of Congress and US taxpayers, Mercy Corps was already working in Iraq to strengthen over 100 local non-profit organizations and we were also training hundreds of influential and well connected conflict mediators. I have seen for myself just how capable and sophisticated Iraqi civil society has become in just a short period of time, while also recognizing that civil society is still relatively new and emerging in Iraq. With the crisis, civil society will need ongoing support. This is particularly true in areas of the country that have not benefited from the relatively secure and supportive environment of the Kurdish Region of Iraq, and where the vast majority of civil society organizations are less than a decade old.

In Sulaymaniyah for example, Mercy Corps is supporting the Kurdish Economic Development Organization or KEDO, a twenty-year-old NGO specializing in micro-finance, which is now on the front lines of the crisis. With its deep roots in the community, KEDO is working directly with the local government to target hard-to-reach newly displaced arrivals with hygiene kits and food parcels. While in Kirkuk, another Iraqi NGO, Foundation of United for Relief and Sustainable Development (FUAD) is delivering aid to displaced Iraqis in rural neighborhoods that neither the UN nor Mercy Corps, on our own, would be able to reach. And KEDO and FUAD's direct deliveries serve yet another purpose -- preventing, or at least delaying, even more displaced Iraqis from flocking to over-crowded bigger cities.

And it is also important to note that these programs are not the big ticket infrastructure projects of years past. These comparatively low-cost, targeted, programs have a multiplier effect. For example: the Iraqi Center for Negotiation Skills and Conflict Management, an Iraqi NGO, was created to reduce violence across Iraq and the whole Middle East region. Mercy Corps, with funding from the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) and USAID has supported this center in its mediator training since 2010. The Center has invested years in training to establish a

nationwide volunteer network of 350 Iraqi leaders in interest-based negotiation including: men and women, Sunni, Shia and Christians, Arabs and Kurds, religious leaders, tribal elders, government officials, politicians, and members of Parliament.

Most, if not all, of these interventions have happened organically without direction from Mercy Corps or the government. For example, one of those trained by Mercy Corps, Ala Kamal a female NGO leader in Sulaymaniyah told me how shortly after the recent humanitarian crisis began she started a grassroots campaign. The campaign included local Christians and Muslims to collect in-kind donations and fundraise outside of Parliament for newly displaced Yazidi families -- in order to welcome them and pro-actively build social cohesion.

And yet despite Iraq's decade-long civil war, in recent years, we have seen a dramatic reduction in US government funding for civil society and conflict mitigation programming -- for instance Economic Support Funds (ESF) were reduced by 69% between 2013 to 2014.

Recommendations for Congress:

While the situation is bleak, there are still a number of concrete steps that Congress can take right now to help the people of Iraq, and to contribute to reducing tensions and investments in the kinds of programs that can eventually, when appropriate, segue to reconciliation once the current crisis abates and people start returning home. With that in mind, I would like to leave the Commission with the following four key recommendations:

First, fully fund the International Disaster Assistance (IDA) account and support robust funding to the Economic Support Fund (ESF) to meet rapidly growing humanitarian needs as winter has now arrived.

- Congress must support the \$90 million in International Disaster Assistance (IDA) funding outlined in the President's supplemental request for Iraq, as well as provide a total of \$3.5 billion in the International Disaster Assistance Account in the SFOPS FY15 bill to allow the US government to respond to the pressing and historic humanitarian needs around the world.
- The FY15 Senate appropriations bill recognized the importance of civil society and included \$50 million in Economic Support Funds (ESF) in the SFOPS bill for Iraq. We urge you to support this level and to continue strong support for ESF in FY16 to prepare Iraq today for a future peace.

Second, enable and empower the new central government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and the Kurdish regional government (KRG) to gain credibility among Iraqis by being responsive to the needs of conflict-affected Iraqi and Syrian people. And at the same time, adopt a national approach to integrate needs assessments, coordination and delivery of humanitarian assistance.

- Iraq's central government has just created a High National Committee in Baghdad to respond to the emergency, while the Kurdish Regional Government has created its own Joint Coordination Committee (JCC) in Erbil. And while both committees were designed to better coordinate, strategize and plan with the United Nations, importantly they are not coordinated with one another and they do not include representation from implementing partners -- both international NGOs and local NGOs which are interacting with communities all over the country.

Third, significantly expand international donor assistance beyond the autonomous Kurdish region -- which currently hosts 47 percent of internally displaced Iraqis, yet receives the vast majority of funding -- in order to support all conflict-affected populations in need across the rest of the country.

- According to a recent NGO led assessment, internally displaced Iraqis from Anbar have the least amount of funding at only \$3 per person, although it is increasingly one of the most affected and contested governorates.¹ This inadvertently plays into rivalries over resources and takes a segmented, rather than a nation-wide approach to addressing needs.
- The key to the success of a comprehensive approach to need is engaging with a range of Iraqi frontline responders. Especially in areas where the UN and international humanitarian agencies cannot operate securely, the US government must prioritize funding mechanisms that allow for scaling up engagement with existing networks of local NGOs or other well-established Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to deliver assistance to conflict affected populations where they are currently living.
- This will also reduce the likelihood of secondary and tertiary displacements to already crowded cities like Erbil, Sulaymaniyah and Dohuk.

Fourth, in order to defuse potential conflicts in already fragile communities, the US government must adopt a more holistic -- relief to resilience approach to programs -- even in its humanitarian response.

- For example, the sudden mass displacements of tens of thousands of ethnically and religiously diverse Iraqis including: Sunni, Shia, Turkmen, Christians and Yazidis -- combined with refugees from next door in Syria -- has the real potential to disrupt the delicate equilibrium that exists within current community structures.
- The US must not wait for bigger conflicts to erupt inside camps or in urban host communities before it integrates a conflict mitigation approach in order to build social cohesion into its emergency response programming.
- Even after the Islamic State has been forced to retreat from Iraq, some believe that this is when the real crisis will begin. If history is any guide, that would be when retributions against those who supported IS could begin. A proactive

¹ See: <http://www.acaps.org/img/reports/f-funding-tracking-analysis-for-the-idp-response-in-iraq-7-oct-2014.pdf>.

strategy is essential now to get ahead of calls for revenge and prevent additional bloodshed.

- And while the oil wealth of Iraq should pay for major infrastructure as well as social services, the US and other donors must recognize that the Iraqi government has just announced its national budget is overspent, and until a new budget is approved, it will be unable to invest appropriately in its civil society groups that foster reconciliation programming.

I wish to sincerely thank the Commission for its focus on this tremendously important issue, and for extending me the privilege of testifying today. I look forward to answering any of your questions.