

**Press release:
18 March 2008**

Five years on Europe still ignoring the suffering of Iraqi refugees

(Brussels 18 March 2008) ECRE today published new results of a survey on the treatment of Iraqi asylum seekers in 21 EU Member States. The results show once more that there are still significant differences between EU Member States with regard to how many asylum seekers receive international protection, how many Iraqi refugees have been resettled to Europe, how many are forced to return to Iraq and the situation of Iraqis whose asylum applications are rejected but cannot return. EU Member States need to urgently take steps to end the protection lottery for Iraqis in Europe.

The crisis of displaced Iraqis remains a massive and lasting challenge. Approximately 2 million Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers are currently living in Syria, Jordan and other countries in the region. By way of contrast, only some 100.000 Iraqis have asked for asylum in the EU since the invasion.

In 2007, the proportion of Iraqi asylum seekers actually recognised as refugees in first instance varied from approximately 85% in Germany and 82% in Sweden to 13% in the UK. In the same year five EU Member States returned Iraqi asylum seekers to Iraq whilst the other Member States did not. Many Iraqis who do not receive a form of protection cannot return to Iraq for reasons beyond their control such as the unsafe conditions in Iraq. How such people are treated also varies greatly between countries: some European countries like Norway grant them basic living conditions while others leave them destitute. Removing support in such cases all too often results in more homeless and hungry people living in constant fear.

Bjarte Vandvik, ECRE Secretary General, said:

“EU Member States should stop ignoring their responsibilities and share the responsibility for asylum seekers more fairly. An asylum seeker should have exactly the same chance of getting protection in any EU country”.

On the basis of this new evidence ECRE urges EU Member States to:

- Determine all the asylum applications of Iraqis fairly and consistently;
- Create more resettlement possibilities for Iraqis in Europe;
- Suspend forced returns and stop promoting voluntary returns;
- Give those who cannot be returned sufficient material assistance so they can live in dignity.

The EU should also ensure access to EU territory for anyone fleeing the violence in Iraq so they can apply for asylum. This means looking at measures to facilitate access to Europe, including

the relaxation of the current visa restrictions for Iraqis, family reunification rules and issuing humanitarian visas.

“All steps that EU member States take towards better protection for Iraqi asylum seekers will be meaningless if those who deserve protection cannot reach it”, Bjarte Vandvik said.

For further comments/background and interviews:

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Note for the editors:

1) The European Council on Refugees and Exiles is a pan-European network of refugee-assisting NGOs in 28 European Countries, and is concerned with the protection and integration of all individuals seeking protection in Europe. See www.ecre.org

2) ECRE's paper *Five years on Europe is still ignoring its responsibilities towards Iraqi refugees* is available [here](#).

3) In April 2007 ECRE published updated Guidelines on the treatment of Iraqi asylum seekers. This document can be read [here](#)

4) In December 2007 ECRE issued a paper on access to protection in Europe called *Defending refugees' access to protection in Europe* that can be read as a 5-page [summary](#) or in [full](#)

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