

## **Refugees Await Return to Fallujah**

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Living in makeshift shelters across Baghdad, refugee families from Fallujah are increasingly resentful about their situation.

Thousands of Fallujah families who fled to Baghdad prior to November's United States-led strike on the troubled city are set to spend several more weeks in temporary accommodation.

But with only limited amounts of aid reaching them, they are increasingly angry with Coalition forces and the Iraqi government.

Many of the refugee families are grouped in makeshift shelters around the Iraqi capital, with local residents and non-government organisations, NGOs, doing their best to provide for their basic needs.

Twelve families are living in a temporary camp near the Baghdad International Fair, set up by the Humanitarian Aid Society, HAS, an Iraqi NGO. Conditions are primitive, with no running water available, and an average of nine people sleeping in tents designed to hold just three.

"We've done our best, but we only have ten small tents which aren't enough for 100 refugees. Some people have even had to sleep in the open," explains HAS director Saleem Abd al-Ghani.

The charity, which has also been distributing foodstuffs to the refugees, says the majority of donations have come from ordinary Iraqis.

"We deliver basic food like rice, bread, tea and sugar," explained Ghani. "Additionally, we've received donations of clothes, and monetary contributions of around four million dinars, from rich Iraqis. On top of that, many ordinary people have just turned up at the camp with food they've cooked for the refugees."

Ayad Aayed and his family have been living in the camp since the fighting in Fallujah began.

"When we got here, there were no tents, so we slept on the ground," he said. "Then HAS gave us a small tent, some clothes, food and water. People from the city came and brought us other things we needed."

Aayed and his family do not know what they will find when they are finally able to go back to Fallujah. "We've heard that the Americans have bombed most of the houses and ruined them, including ours," he said. "But we've no idea when we'll be able to go home and see for ourselves."

For Mustafa al-Esawi, it's the second time this year that he and his family have been forced to leave their home in the troubled Sunni city.

After fleeing in April when Coalition forces first tried to root out insurgents, Esawi decided this time to take his wife and two daughters straight to the HAS camp. "But when we got there, there was no room so instead they sent us to a camp near al-Yermuk which had been set up by the Omar al-Mukhtar charity."

He, like many other refugees from the city, is angry about the Coalition's decision to invade. "If I wasn't handicapped, I would have stayed there to fight and defend my town," Esawi told IWPR.

Almost any covered space in the capital has been converted into a refuge for the displaced, and the mosque at Baghdad University now houses some 40 families, who sit in the main prayer hall eating meals provided by the prayer leader or imam.

"We came to Baghdad just as the fighting started," refugee Abd al-Ameer told IWPR. "We had nothing to eat or drink and nowhere to sleep, so people told us to go to the mosque and ask for help. We can eat, sleep and wash here."

Taxi driver Yousif Salah, also staying in the mosque, said, "Conditions in Fallujah are really bad. I haven't had work for eight months. Now that we've left Fallujah, we need food and we need money. We're hoping there is an NGO that can help us."

The old al-Tagi military base, which served as an army officer training camp under the Baathists, has become a shelter for another group of refugee families.

Pensioner Muntadher Mohammed ended up there with seven members of his family. "We've got somewhere to stay, but it's just walls and a ceiling. There are no doors or windows let alone electricity or water," he said.

"For the first two weeks, we didn't get any aid packages from charities or NGOs. The only help we had was from people in the villages around the camp."

Muntadher is determined to return to his city as soon as possible, saying, "Once I can get decent shelter for my family, I'll go back. Some of my relatives are still there and I want to find out what has happened to them."

However, according to US Marine Captain Dan Wilson, it will be weeks before residents can return to their homes, "We have to search around 50,000 buildings in the city. As any of them could have weapons stored in them, this search is going to delay people's return."

The longer the refugees spend in these makeshift camps, the greater the resentment they are expressing towards both the Coalition forces and the interim Iraqi government.

Many were scathing about statements that prime minister Iyad Allawi and security minister Qasem Dawood made recently about an imminent start to reconstruction in the battle-scarred city.

But more worrying perhaps for the authorities, all of the refugees interviewed by IWPR said they had lost what faith they had in Allawi's government, and plan to boycott the nationwide elections scheduled for January.

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