

# A visit to Iraq and Jordan.....January 2008

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In January I had the opportunity to spend almost two weeks seeing first-hand another side of this war—the humanitarian effort to provide basic necessities to its victims.

My trip was sponsored by International Relief and Development (IRD). IRD was founded by UCC minister Arthur Keyes and I have been a member of the Board of Directors for a number of years. The purpose of the trip was to visit IRD's initiatives in Iraq and Jordan.

Most of this work is funded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees or USAID and almost always it is undertaken in close collaboration with local organizations like the Red Crescent Society or other humanitarian groups.

On the ground in Erbil, Iraq, we traveled through the darkness to the IRD guest house in a primarily "Christian" neighborhood. It quickly became obvious that "something was different"—the street lights were off, the houses and shops were dark, the streets were empty.

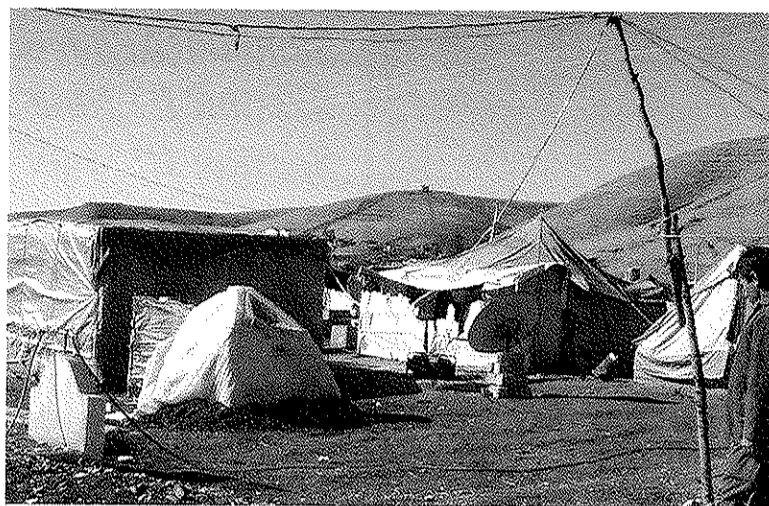
The lack of a working centralized electrical system is an everyday reality. At the guest house large generators buzzed constantly to provide the creature comforts to which we have become accustomed. The generators also provided power for the offices and a few neighbors who had been invited to "tap" in. This resulted in a tangle of wires. (A USAID official later told me that restoration of the region's electrical system was the number one priority—but it had been "delayed".)

## Visited 5 camps

Over the next two days we visited five camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). In each of the camps IRD initiatives were being undertaken on behalf of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The IRD initiatives provided wells for clean water, electricity for the wells, basic medical care and short term jobs through garbage clean up (trash, often in the form of plastic bags, was everywhere).

In one camp the mayor repeatedly listed the needs of the village and its neighboring camp—another well, electricity, resident medical care (a mobile team now visits), food, jobs... The mayor led our tour as we walked in the mud through the camp and saw the faces of the residents living in the rows of tents covered with bright blue tarps.

They were grateful for the assistance they had received but needed more, much more, in order to reestablish their lives. Their tent city



One of the camps in northern Iraq



John Deckenback tours another camp

in Mosul, adjacent to their ancestors' village, became their escape from the fighting

At another camp UNHCR funded a well through IRD two years earlier. Now, the village had grown and the overall water system was inadequate. IRD staff, local officials (including the census taker), and the district water engineer huddled to determine if the per capita water availability meet minimum standards. As I listened I wondered what it would be like at home if we had to live at "minimum" standards. The villagers asked IRD for another well.

## Former military base

Early the next day we visited the first of three more camps. One was on a former military base. The skeletons of the military housing were there but the infrastructure to support the housing was long gone. We were told that it had been a training base during "Sadam's time." The engineer for the IRD installed water system proudly displayed his work while residents in blue jump suits collected garbage in the nearby fields through another IRD program.

Our second stop was at a village being rebuilt in the hills. Again IRD was constructing a water system. The villagers explained the community had been destroyed twice during the "regime" and many had relocated to Bagdad. Now their Bagdad neighborhood was inhospitable to



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Christians and they were returning to "family" home. They expected others to be joining them soon.

In each camp the IRD staff appeared to be well-known and treated with considerable respect. And, at the same, time the residents were not at all shy about asking for "more..." The assumption appeared to be an expectation that because IRD had delivered before therefore IRD could deliver again.

In Amman we learned of partnership with IRD to provide medical care for the thousands of Iraqi refugees in the city. The idea was to register 30,000 in the first year; after 8 months they have already signed up over 50,000. There are 500,000 Iraqi refugees in Jordan: a great number are women, many with young children.