THE MARSH DWELLERS OF IRAQ

Of Iraq’s 26 million plus people, approximately 75 to 80% are Arabs, 15 to 20% are Kurds and roughly 5% are Turkamans, Armenians and others. A distinct sub-group within the Arab community is known as the Marsh Dwellers, who have historically inhabited the Mesopotamian marshlands of southern Iraq.

No accurate figures exist for the Marsh Dwellers of Iraq but, of an estimated 250,000 population in the 1990s, their population dropped to 85,000 before the war in 2003 due to persecution by the Saddam Hussain regime. Currently, registered refugees and internally displaced peoples are listed at just over 78,000 although the actual number is most likely to be much higher. Many of the displaced have not returned to their former lands, and may never do so.

Marsh Dwellers traditionally inhabited a land of interconnected lakes, mudflats and wetlands within modern-day Iraq and Iran. They constructed artificial islands and depended on fishing, hunting, rice and date cultivation.

Although there is significant prejudice against Marsh Dwellers in Iraq, no legislation protecting the rights of Marsh Dwellers or any other indigenous group within Iraq has been developed to date.

Following the end of the Gulf War in 1991, the Marsh Dwellers in Iraq took part in the rebellion against Saddam Hussein’s regime in an uprising that became known as the “Shiite or Shabayna Uprising”. To control the region, the Iraqi regime implemented a program for the
systematic desiccation of the marshes by diverting the water, burning the reeds and poisoning the waters.

In addition, the regime waged a brutal campaign in which whole villages were destroyed by aerial bombardment and bulldozing. Many of the Marsh Dwellers died or fled the area during this time and the marshes themselves shrank to less than 10% of their original size, the rest having been turned into wastelands.

**The return of the Marshes and the Marsh Dwellers**

To date, 58% of the marshlands have been re-flooded (primarily as a direct result of action taken by the Marsh Dwellers and the Iraqi Min-
istry of Water Resources) and wetland vegetation cover has increased throughout the marshland area. Fish and animals have returned; rare and endangered bird species have been reconfirmed in the marsh areas; water buffalo populations are recovering and, in general, the biodiversity of the area, upon which the Marsh Dwellers rely, is increasing. With the return of water, the people continue to filter back to the marshlands to rebuild their villages with reed huts and exquisite mudhifs (guesthouses).

But many problems remain. Large areas remain barren or have problems with high salinity. Fishermen are using unsustainable practices (such as the use of electro-shocking and the application of pesticides) to harvest fish. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have listed shelter, employment, desalination of water and development of water networks, improved sanitation and health services, construction and funding of schools as priority needs to support the return of Marsh Dwellers and other refugees and IDPs to the Marshland Areas.

Future challenges

The year 2006 has seen increasing instability in Iraq and there is still no coordinated plan for the region. Our last report on the governorates indicated a poor quality of service in most public sectors (power, potable water, education, health, etc.) and this situation, though improved in localized areas due to small projects being carried out by governmental and non-governmental organizations, remains largely the same overall.

Land ownership remains a potential issue that will eventually have to be dealt with. Many Marsh Dwellers were forcibly relocated to new areas when the drying occurred, which has further complicated the ownership issue and impedes the process of marshland restoration. For example, in Thi Qar Governorate, where entire villages were razed to the ground, many of these villages were located in rural marshland areas and were not registered on the official land or estate registries. Thus returning refugees do not qualify for compensation under current legislation and claims can only be pursued through the ordinary civil courts.

It has been established that there is water available in Iraq for the restoration of up to 75% of the marshlands, in concert with a more ef-
ficient utilization of Iraq’s water resources. A set of tools developed by a working group of Italian and Iraqi experts, called the New Eden Group, is now available to the Iraqi regional and local government and aid agencies to address the issue of water resource allocation, marshland restoration and socio-economic development in the area.\footnote{7}

**Activities by and for Marsh Dwellers**

Tribal and family affiliations still dominate in the Marshland areas, but new indigenous organizations are forming. To date, the Iraqi government has made very little investment in the Marshland areas and the Marsh Dwellers have formed associations and village councils to promote their rights and organize their own projects to provide health care and other services to their members. One example is the Chubayish Marsh Arab Council in Thi Qar Governorate. This organization was formed to bring back and develop the marshes and help restore the rights of the people who live in the marshes by providing services in all aspects of life, education and health. There are at least two other groups in Thi Qar Governorate, two to three in Missan, and up to eight groups in Basrah Governorate.

Environmental and humanitarian aid groups are also involved in the area. Nature Iraq is involved in research in the marshland areas as well as assisting with a pilot project to develop a “Green Village” in the Marshland Area and a feasibility study for a future Marshland National Park. The Rafha Organization is involved in representing and advocating for the needs of the refugee communities in Thi Qar and Basrah governorates. Together to Protect Humans & the Environment of Baghdad and the Ibn Sina Society of Basrah are developing a project for women in these areas to create and market their craftwork. A Czech group called People in Need is also working in these communities. \footnote{8}

**Notes**

\footnote{1} The dwellers are also known as “Marsh Arabs” or “Ma’dan”. The former specifically refers to Bedouin groups who moved into the marshes perhaps only 500 to 1,000 years ago; the term Ma’dan is a pejorative term in Iraq but some
believe that the Ma’dan are the truly indigenous people. The term Marsh Dweller is used here as it is more inclusive of the cultural values that are consistent between the two (or more) groups that live in the marshes.

According to some sources, the number may have been as high as 500,000. –Ed.


