Internal migration soars in Iraq, altering sectarian landscape

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BAGHDAD: A vast internal migration is radically reshaping Iraq's ethnic and sectarian landscape, according to new data collected by thousands of relief workers, but displacement in the most populous and mixed areas is surprisingly complex, suggesting that partitioning the country into semiautonomous Sunni Arab, Shiite and Kurdish enclaves would not be easy.

The migration data, which are expected to be released this week by the Iraqi Red Crescent Society but were shared in advance with The New York Times, indicate that in Baghdad alone there are now nearly 170,000 families, accounting for almost a million people, that have fled their homes in search of security, shelter, water, electricity, functioning schools or jobs to support their families.

The figures show that many families move two or three times or more, first fleeing immediate danger and then making more-considered calculations based on the availability of city services or schools for their children. Finding neighbors of their own sect is just one of those considerations.

Over all, the patterns suggest that despite the ethnic and sectarian animosity that has gripped the country, at least some Iraqis would rather continue to live in mixed communities.

The Red Crescent compiled the figures from reports filed as recently as the end of August by tens of thousands of relief workers scattered across all parts of Iraq who are straining to provide aid for an estimated 280,000 families swept up nationwide in an enormous and complex migration.

And while a bird's-eye view of the data suggests that since the bombing of a revered Shiite mosque in February 2006 triggered severe sectarian strife, Sunnis generally have been moving north and west, Shiites south and Christians to the far north. But the picture in the mixed and highly populous center of the country is becoming more complicated.

It is this mixed population center that some advocates of partition have suggested would develop into more-homogeneous areas as Iraqis seek safety among members of their own sect.

But the new figures show that the migration is not neatly dividing Baghdad along the Tigris, separating Sunnis who live predominantly on the west bank from Shiites, who live predominantly on the east.

Instead, some Sunnis are moving to the predominantly Shiite side of the river, into neighborhoods that are relatively secular, mixed and where services are better, according to Red Crescent staff.

Some poor Iraqis, such as those fleeing ethnic cleansing by Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia in villages in the eastern province of Diyala, make the only choice available to them: Head for Baghdad and stop in one of the refugee camps on the fringes of town amid the other desperately poor.

The size and scope of the migration has elicited concern on the part of aid officials. Relief workers "have a mammoth task to alleviate the sufferings of this vast number of Iraqis," a draft report on the Red Crescent figures says.

Although Iraqis of every income level, sect, ethnicity and region of the country have been caught up in this migration, perhaps the most tragic consequences turn up where enormous numbers of poor Iraqi villagers have collected in camps, shantytowns and urban slums after leaving behind almost everything they owned, said Dr. Said Hakki, a physician who is the president of the Red Crescent.

"It's tragic, absolutely tragic," Hakki said. "I have been a surgeon all my life, and I have seen death many times; that never scared me, never shook me. But when I saw the toll here in Iraq," he said, referring to the groups of displaced people, "that definitely shook me."

"How could a human let human beings suffer so much for so long?" Hakki said.

A jump in the recorded number of displaced people toward the end of the summer led the Red Crescent to delay releasing the report for about 10 days as the organization checked and double-checked the figures, Hakki said.

But he said that the figures, based on data collected in 130 branch offices, including 43 in Baghdad, by about 95,000 Red Crescent volunteers and a smaller number of regular employees, survived the scrutiny.

The Red Crescent figures, which are collected periodically, have broadly been consistent with data assembled by the International Organization for Migration, which is affiliated with the United Nations and collects its data from the Iraqi government and other sources.

But when contacted about the politically sensitive findings in the latest Red Crescent report, a spokesman for the Iraqi Ministry of Displacement and Migration, which tracks internal displacement for the government, said he believed the figures were too high.

"The Red Crescent organization and even other international organizations we don't consider their statistics to be official," said the spokesman, Sattar Nowroz.

Figures at both the Red Crescent and the Organization of Migration have previously shown that the numbers of internally displaced Iraqis has soared since the troop increase began. Nowroz conceded that the migration ministry had just 600 employees nationwide to track displaced people.

Red Crescent workers point to a trends during the summer that contributed to the increased numbers that their organization is seeing in Baghdad.

Fighting in Diyala set people on the roads, fleeing the ongoing military operations by the U.S. military against extremist Sunni Arab fighters. People who had fled to Jordan and Syria began

to return because both countries began to enforce visa requirements for Iraqis who wanted to stay.

Sunnis also began to flee their homes because of the clashes between the Awakening movements, groups of Sunni Arab tribesmen who banded together to fight Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia.