

The UN Baghdad bombing: one month on

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Nearly a month after the attack on the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad, humanitarian aid workers are in a state of flux. Mandatory staffing reductions have reduced UN international staff to mere placeholders in Iraq. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) still in Iraq operate with decreasing profiles and increasing trepidation. Those relocated to Jordan and Kuwait attempt to manage projects via “remote management” while theorising on re-entry strategies. All of this occurs amidst deteriorating security conditions, the uncertain possibility of broader international involvement and discussing the competing pressures of responsibility versus risk.

While Security Council members discuss a possible resolution giving the UN and Iraqis more authority in shaping the future of the country and the Bush administration continues to insist that Iraq is the “central front” in the [war on terrorism](#) [0], organisations are adapting to a new, ever-changing reality.

The impact of violence

The bombing of the United Nations mission in Baghdad that killed the special envoy [Sergio Vieira de Mello](#) [0] and twenty-one others on 19 August 2003 remains unsolved, and so far no one has claimed responsibility. It was the most deadly attack ever against the UN. It also confirmed alarming, but mostly ignored, safety concerns. In response, the FBI has opened an investigation and the UN has authorised two investigations of its own into the security at the Canal Hotel where the mission was based.

UN staff demanded the second, independent investigation because they worried that the internal review led by UN security coordinator [Tun Myat](#) [1] would be insufficient or might downplay the UN’s responsibility. This investigation will attempt to answer questions on security lapses – such as whether UN officials refused offers by Coalition Provisional Authority ([CPA](#) [2]) forces to increase their military presence, and if the coalition and the UN ignored security recommendations made by the security management team.

At the time of the bombing, about 300 international staff worked in Baghdad and another 300 operated out of the southern city of Basra and Erbil in the north. After it, injured staff were evacuated to Amman, Jordan, others took leave and the rest transferred to Jordan and Kuwait; thus, the UN presence inside the country is now only about 50 individuals in Baghdad and another 50 in Erbil. This drastic reduction means that most agencies have only a few core staff remaining in Iraq; programming, although severely constrained, has continued, yet new implementation for the most part, ceased.

The decision of international staff to relocate was taken with a heavy heart. In addition to unfinished projects, we left behind more than a thousand national staff. They keep the office open and monitor projects, all the while anticipating our return.

In late July, attackers opened fire on an International Organisation on Migration (IOM [3]) convoy driving from Baghdad to Hilla, and killed the driver [4]. In response the IOM international staff moved to Baghdad. When the Hilla national staff inquired about the date of our return there, I replied that it would take a few weeks. I retained an optimistic view even after the bombing of the UN headquarters, even though I had serious doubts regarding our ability to operate in such dangerous circumstances.

When and under what conditions international staff will return are major topics of discussion. The UN secretary-general Kofi Annan has said repeatedly the UN will not abandon Iraq and its most powerful member state, the United States, is likely to repel any effort to shut down the mission.

For now, most agencies are rotating staff into Baghdad and Erbil [5]. This again poses difficulties for maintaining any sense of continuity. It is likely to be several months before the UN agencies are staffed up and even then it will be under comprehensive, some say excessive, minimum operating security standards. More stringent measures, like a thirty-metre perimeter wall surrounding each office and blast film covering the windows, seem probable.

In the interim period, the relocated staff work in the safer and more comfortable surroundings of Iraq's neighbours to the west and south. After the dangerous and increasingly deadly Iraqi environment, Jordan and Kuwait are a welcome change; communications, while not ideal, are fairly reliable, and thus far the system seems to be working. But the attempts of international staff to manage projects from afar – relying on national staff, remaining NGOs, and the CPA and its contacts for implementation – are also fraught with difficulties. This remote management is a short- to medium-term solution only; there really is no substitute for actually being there.

The guilt of the relocated

But the “internationals” will be unable to return as long as the current, ambiguous situation remains. The United States and other countries – France and Germany in particular – need to agree on the new roles of the United Nations, CPA and the Iraq Governing Council. Yet even clarity here will not itself mean much if the security situation deteriorates further and humanitarian and reconstruction efforts cannot resume.

UN and humanitarian workers did not “run away”, contrary to what some [like Martin Peretz in a recent New Republic [6] (subscription only) article] say. The relocation was not by choice; the only alternative was to stay and take even more casualties. With mobility and access so severely restricted, the cost-benefit analysis of staying or going tilted toward leaving.

But the debate over proper roles and responsibilities is secondary to the feeling of angst most humanitarian aid workers have regarding their current state of limbo. Many feel guilty about “abandoning” projects and the Iraqi people they had come to help. And we are acutely aware that our inability to implement programmes is contributing to the downward spiral in Iraq.

How can things get better if humanitarian aid workers are not available to assist with food distribution [7], and reconstruction efforts to rebuild vital infrastructure like schools and health clinics are put on hold until we return? In addition, our departure has an impact on those remaining – the NGOs and contractors who have their own motivations and pressures for staying, and the soldiers and reservists who have no choice.

The men and women who make up the coalition are in a unique position. In some cases these soldiers fought the war, then went through an odd transformation and became civil engineers and public information specialists as they began to help Iraq rebuild. Current conditions place a

heavy burden on the soldiers as they continue to fight to root out terror and criminals and maintain reconstruction efforts. They look constantly over their shoulders, aware that they may be the next victims of a grenade or improvised explosive device.

Indeed, contrary to the Bush administration's rosy assessments of the situation, things seem to be going from bad to worse [8]. The bombings in Najaf and Erbil, continued attacks against coalition forces and the inability of the major players to reach a consensus on the future role for the United Nations necessitate a bleaker outlook. Despite my earlier optimism, when I am now asked when I'll return, I don't respond "soon, *insha'allah* (God willing)". I say simply, I don't know.

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