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Contact: Joy Portella, 206.437.7885, jportella@sea.mercycorps.org
Susan Laarman, 503.341.3799, slaar@imagina.com

Mercy Corps Calls for Greater Response to Dire Humanitarian Situation in Iraq

Millions of displaced persons in Iraq and neighboring countries are vulnerable and lack access to basic resources

Agency urges intensified international response to humanitarian needs

Portland, OR - The global relief and development agency Mercy Corps today called for increased attention and resources to address the humanitarian situation in war-torn Iraq and neighboring countries. Confronted with extremely high numbers of internally displaced persons and refugees, recent violence in the south, and the inability of many Iraqis to access basics like food and water, Mercy Corps asked for a renewed international commitment to protect and assist Iraqi civilians.

The agency issued its remarks as U.S. General David Petraeus and Ambassador to Baghdad Ryan Crocker began their testimony before Congress on the "state of Iraq" this week.

"While the debate about military and political gains rages in Washington, we cannot forget the humanitarian crisis, which has forced millions of people to flee their homes," said Nancy Lindborg, president of Mercy Corps. "Any proposed solutions for long-term stability in Iraq must include a strong focus on building confidence among the Iraqi people, meeting their basic needs, and preventing further displacement."

Mercy Corps cited the high number of internally displaced persons and refugees and their unmet needs as indicators of a grave humanitarian situation. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 1.5 million people have been displaced within Iraq since 2006, putting the total number of internally displaced persons at more than 2.7 million.

UNHCR also estimates that the number of refugees in the region tops two million. Many have fled to neighboring Syria and Jordan, and refugees are not returning home to Iraq in any significant number. Life remains uncertain and tense for people who have left their homes, many of whom are not receiving assistance, cannot work, and are cut off from their former communities.

"Not only does the refugee situation put an enormous burden on the region, but Mercy Corps is increasingly concerned about the very high number of people displaced within Iraq. The internally displaced are often the most vulnerable who do not have the

resources to leave the country. Many are women, young people or people with disabilities" explained Paul Butler, Mercy Corps country director who has worked in Iraq since 2003. "We see everyday that the displaced lack basics like food and water, not to mention access to healthcare and education."

According to recent figures from the United Nations, four million Iraqis do not have enough food, only 40 percent have reliable access to safe drinking water, and about one third of the population is cut off from basic healthcare.

Iraqi civilians remain inadequately protected. This was underscored when hundreds of civilians were killed during recent clashes between the Shia cleric Maqtada al-Sadr's Madhi militia and Iraqi and U.S. forces in Basra, Amarah and other southern cities. A fragile ceasefire remains in place, but Mercy Corps has spent the past two weeks responding to emergency needs. In Basra alone, the agency has distributed more than 1.3 million liters of water and is beginning to offer food parcels to 3,000 poor families.

In the face of these burgeoning humanitarian concerns, Mercy Corps calls for:

Intensified attention to and appropriate assistance for the needs of Iraqi civilians, particularly internally displaced people, refugees and other vulnerable populations. A strong, multi-lateral and international effort to address Iraq's humanitarian challenges, including the United Nations and European Union countries and with the U.S. playing a key role.

Better protection for civilians to ensure their safety and ability to obtain basic resources like food, water and medicine.

Aid efforts that work to achieve the long-term development of a peaceful, prosperous Iraq and encourage the participation and leadership of local communities.

Mercy Corps has provided humanitarian assistance to hundreds of thousands of Iraqis since 2003. The agency works in both northern and southern Iraq, and its work focuses on offering assistance and opportunities to vulnerable populations such as women, people with disabilities, youth and people who are internally displaced. Mercy Corps also has operations in Jordan and Syria that provide cash assistance, food, education and counseling for Iraqi refugees. In addition, Mercy Corps leads reconstruction, economic development, and education programs throughout Iraq.

Photos available upon request. Contact Caitlin Carlson at ccarlson@mercycorps.org

Mercy Corps works amid disasters, conflicts, chronic poverty and instability to unleash the potential of people who can win against nearly impossible odds. Since 1979, Mercy Corps has provided \$1.3 billion in assistance to people in 100 nations. Supported by headquarters offices in North America and Europe, the agency's unified global programs employ 3,400 staff worldwide and reach nearly 14.4 million people in more than 35 countries. www.mercycorps.org